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REVELATION

ANDRÉ BIRABEAU

REVELATION

TRANSLATED BY
UNA LADY TROUBRIDGE

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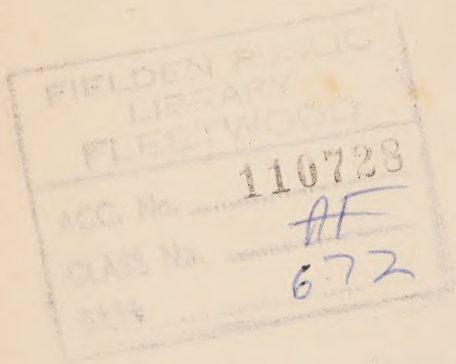

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I

It is not without justification that the Rue Le Verrier bears the name of that scholar. As men of science are apt to do, it forgets its century. Like them also, it appears absorbed by some interior vision. True, it connects the Rue d'Assas with the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, but it would seem to do so with nonchalance. It is ready enough to believe that in these days of ours there may be taxis, motor lorries, or even motor omnibuses, but it is seldom that anything occurs to confirm that belief. When some stray auto-monster appears to deafen it with hideous din, the street seems scared and as it were offended. Even so I can imagine was Mr. Le Verrier, its godfather, when an unwelcome intruder came to shatter his abstraction.

The close of a June day. Twilight has settled on the street with a savour of provincialism. This is not imagination on my part, I assure you. When evening succeeds a hot day, the streets of Paris have their own peculiar glamour. The dust has not yet settled, the children are still raising it with

their after-dinner games ; front doors are gaping wide and gossip echoes from threshold to threshold. But in the Rue Le Verrier, the evening is lonely : the glow of a cigarette on a balcony ; the notes of a piano through an open window. . . . The Provinces. Yes, even should the piano play a foxtrot or a blues, one seems to hear "The Carnival of Venice. . . ."

Madame Chanvre, the concierge, drags a chair to the threshold of her door. Madame Chanvre is a stout lady whose bosom is as weak as it is weighty ; when she sits down she has the appearance of holding a little dog on her knees, but she is only nursing her own abundance. The gentleman from the fourth floor is going out.

" Are you taking a little walk, Monsieur Baixas ? " enquired Madame Chanvre affably.

" A long walk, madame, I'm sorry to say. This is Tuesday, stick your nose in the air and listen : music. This is the day of the weekly entertainment. Madame Casseneuil, her neighbour Monsieur Coquineau and her friend the violinist give us a treat. Very talented artists all three of them. Not a doubt of it. I should appreciate them warmly at a concert. I can't say as much at home.

Chamber music is all very well, but when it's just underneath my bedroom, I can do without it ! . . . You see, Madame, I'm a peaceful fellow. When nine o'clock strikes I turn the key in the door and there I am in my nightshirt with my little cheek on the pillow. From nine o'clock onwards I snore, and I want no other music. After all, I can't hear myself, can I ? And now, every Tuesday Madame Casseneuil and her musical friends provide me with a concert of Schumann and Chopin. It's very kind of her. Altogether too kind. I've the greatest respect for Madame Casseneuil. She's a delightful woman. I enjoy taking off my hat to her on the stairs. She has eyes that I admire and she reminds me of my late mother. But there remains this question of the chamber music on Tuesdays. Oh ! the music's good enough, I don't deny it, the only thing that's wrong with it is that it is music. I already had young Jenny overhead. In these days Jenny has taken to typing : a doubtful blessing for neighbours who enjoy their sleep. And the poor little devil is plucky too, which makes it all the worse : she hammers at her machine till midnight. Toc, toc, toc, toc, toc, and the bell . . . toc, toc, toc, toc, toc, and the bell . . . But in the end I've got accustomed to that.

It's regular, monotonous, and sleep comes all the same. I only wake when she leaves off. It's like sleeping in a train : as long as it goes on one is sound ; one only wakes when it draws into a station. . . . But when it comes to music, it goes up, it goes down, sometimes it's soft, then it's loud . . . forte, pianissimo . . . and devil a bit of sleep can I get ! . . . So I give it up, and that's that. I just don't try to go to bed until Madame Casseneuil and her old friends have tucked all their instruments into their boxes. And I don't even go home, because if I do it gets on my nerves : each time they come to a full stop I think : 'Now they've finished ! ' and then, five minutes later : ' No ! They're going to play another one ! . . . ' So it's better to clear out ; I might end by hammering on the floor. And I shouldn't like to do that. I'm not a boor. I did begin by rolling the furniture about for an hour or so just to give them a hint that they were annoying me. But they didn't understand. Or they didn't want to. So much the worse. I must make the best of it. On Tuesday evenings I go for a walk. But all the same, Madame Chanvre, there is one serious aspect to the case . . . or at any rate there might be, and I don't mind your telling Madame Casseneuil so if you

should get the opportunity. She's a worthy woman whom I meet every Sunday morning with her prayerbook clasped in her hand, and she's brought up her big son admirably. She ought to realise her responsibilities : because of her chamber music she compels a decent, quietly disposed man to spend two or three hours weekly wandering about the streets of Paris. Well, madame, the Paris streets are no joke, after ten o'clock at night, for any decent man. Especially for a decent man alone. And I don't like walking : I've got tender feet. Three Tuesdays running I went to a cinema : but even walking's better than that, in spite of my feet. And so, two weeks ago, I dropped into a café, I who never drink anything, and there I swallowed three drinks in succession, while I read the papers. And the papers in a café are a matter of chance : one may come across the Temps or the Vie Parisienne. I don't object to the Temps . . . when I'm safe in my bed. As for the Vie Parisienne . . . You can tell Madame Casseneuil that she's been the cause of my reading the Vie Parisienne. . . . Last Tuesday, I didn't go to a café, I just wandered, and I don't know whether you are aware of it, Madame Chanvre, but a gentleman who wanders about all by himself occasionally

meets . . . persons . . . who speak to him. I haven't listened to them, but I couldn't help hearing them. . . . Madame Chanvre, your tenant Madame Casseneuil drives me forth this evening. . . . Should she hear tonight above her respectable head the sound of an impure footstep, you may tell her with my compliments that it's entirely her own fault. . . . "

And Monsieur Baixas moves away, humming the nocturne which Madame Casseneuil is playing and of which the strains fall on the Rue Le Verrier through the open window.

II

A small sitting room. Two people: Madame Casseneuil and Monsieur Coquineau. The piano: a violoncello and the calm air of the Rue Le Verrier entering by the open window.

"A wrong note."

"Yes, Madame."

"The third one, 'cello."

"Madame, I can easily believe it."

"Another? . . . That's enough . . . we'll leave off. It's disgraceful, and you're shockingly lazy: you haven't worked a bit at that nocturne since last Tuesday."

Madame Casseneuil has spun round on her music stool in order to look at Monsieur Coquineau, a gesture much affected by the young girls of twenty years ago.

"Quite the contrary, Madame, I know that nocturne too well. And so, instead of looking at the music, I raised my head. In front of me was a mirror and in that mirror I saw myself. You really can't wonder at my playing wrong notes."

"Why."

"Because in that glass I saw myself as rather old and rather ugly and I say 'in that glass' because only a couple of hours ago, before coming here, I looked at myself in my own mirror and I seemed considerably younger and scarcely ugly at all. Of course, I was in my own home. Lots of people seem to shine when they're by themselves . . . with a sort of solitary radiance. I'll even confess to you, Madame, that I smirked at myself in my mirror. And now, when I look in yours, I can't muster the feeblest grin. It's odd how unrecognisable one can be to oneself! At times one has an optimistic eye; at others one looks dreary. At this moment I have an uncomfortable feeling of seeing myself as others see me; not a cheering sight. What do I see? I see a rather wrinkled little man with a grizzled beard . . . of course there are still plenty of black hairs, but the white ones are undoubtedly getting the upper hand. The eyes are fairly kind . . ."

"Very kind indeed."

"Yes, they are kind, aren't they? Kind eyes. Fifty years old. There's no denying I'm fifty. It remains to determine whether it's better to have lived fifty honourable years, or to be a scamp and only thirty. . . . Of

course that's a question no one but an old man would think of asking. But in any case, my fifty years have been decent. I can say so with conviction because I've never had any profession and so I've never really had any reason for dishonesty. If I told you the story of my life, Madame, you wouldn't need to settle down in your arm-chair to hear it ; it wouldn't take long : nothing has ever happened to me. I'm just an old bachelor. Quite a nice old bachelor, I believe. Anyway, let's say : a nice old bachelor. I've a small income . . . comfortable for my needs, which are reasonable ! Not too many cranks. Just a few whims, perhaps, but they aren't necessarily indelible. For instance, I don't dress well. But, you see, when one goes to one's tailor, it's all very fine for the fitter to stick one before a triple mirror and say ' Will you just look at the back, sir . . . it's a wonderful line.' One isn't really able to judge : it needs someone else there, who takes an interest and who can say : ' Doesn't it wrinkle a bit under the arm . . .' And then the fitter answers: ' Well, yes, we might take it in just a shade here . . . ' And look at me now, I'm wearing a lounge suit. There was a time when I always wore frock coats. It was a tailor who first persuaded me to have one, and I never wore

anything else for twenty years . . . with a white tie and rounded cuffs. . . ."

"You must have looked like an old-fashioned doctor."

"Not at all, Madame, I looked like a shopwalker from the Grand Magasin du Louvre. And so, for years I nursed a secret ambition. . . . I'm telling you all these puerilities because I think they'll make you understand that I'm really not such a bad sort. . . . Well, I had a secret ambition : I wanted to get myself a fawn travelling suit, a check cap and brown shoes. . . . Do you realise that I've never worn a pair of brown shoes in my life ! . . . One day I took my courage in both hands, and went off to see my little tailor. It sounds utterly absurd, but my teeth were set and my heart thumping. The tailor met me with a smile : 'A frock coat for Monsieur Coquineau? I have the measure.' And I answered with a remnant of determination : 'No. This year I'm going to have a lounge suit. . . .' That little old tailor looked at me with such pained surprise that I've simply never dared to tell him that what I really wanted was a light fawn suit. I chose the darkest possible navy blue. And the first time I put it on my

legs were simply longing for the skirts of my frock coat. I was embarrassed, I felt half naked. I huddled my knees together like a woman going to bathe. . . . And I've never yet ventured to complete my travelling outfit. It's true that I haven't travelled either. If I'd really been going on a journey I might have pulled myself together. But you know, when one's alone one does get rather shy. . . . I once saw a portly old gentleman in a hat shop, who was fairly longing for a certain pale grey felt, the kind an American wears on the Riviera. He kept on saying to his wife : ' Do you really and truly think I can ? . . . Shan't I look ridiculous ? ' . . . and she answered : ' It'll suit you splendidly.' And so he bought it and put it on then and there. And he did look ridiculous. But his wife didn't seem to think so."

" I like that."

" So did I . . . very much. . . . It's quite as important as anything else that's happened in my life. Not much to it, is there ? You can understand now ; when one realises that and looks at oneself in the mirror and sums up one's advantages . . . well, there's some excuse for playing wrong notes ! . . . And then there's my name, Coquineau ! What

a name ! Sounds like a sneak-thief ! Or the husband in a farce ! You know what I mean, in low comedy, the scene between the boon companions : ' And now for the pretty ladies ! ' with a caper and a suggestive gesture. . . . Deplorable. And me with quite a serious-looking sort of face ! With a name like mine I ought to have been bred in a music hall. Do you know that when I buy anything in a shop, I always carry it home myself so that I can avoid giving my name at the desk. When I was young, I had a vocation : I wanted to be a solicitor.

" Yes. There are professions like that for which you can't imagine anyone having a vocation. Professions to which people resign themselves, because they can't help it. It's difficult to picture a little boy saying : ' When I'm grown up, I shall be an usher,' or to think of an adolescent longing to be an undertaker. And yet, madame, such things do happen, and my ambition was to be a solicitor. I could see myself, in my office, sitting at my desk, my face in the shade, staring down anxious and wealthy clients. Fundamentally it was the dream of a shy man. Shy people dream of a profession that will give them an advantage over others :

they visualise themselves as superintendents of police, income tax officials, theatrical managers ! . . . And so I wanted to be a solicitor. But no one could be a solicitor with a name like Coquineau : it would be burlesque. . . . Perhaps my name is really the worst thing about me. It's undeniable that in the event of my wishing to marry, it wouldn't be much of a name to offer a lady. . . ."

Monsieur Coquineau pauses. He appears to be rather out of breath. Vague and distant sounds drift in at the window. He resumes :

" Won't you be kind to me, Madame ? Won't you try to understand that I've just done myself the honour of asking you to marry me? Please don't compel me to say the actual words. I'm still sitting opposite your mirror, and I'm afraid of seeing myself look utterly ridiculous making a declaration."

Madame Cassenouil has swung round yet further on her piano stool.

" But really, Monsieur Coquineau . . ."

" You needn't be afraid, Madame. I've no intention of speaking to you like a young man. But I do think I'm entitled to mention esteem and affection. Both are sentiments not

incompatible with declining years. And they are sentiments, Madame, which you unquestionably arouse. Will you permit me to confess that you have aroused them in me."

"Monsieur Coquineau . . ."

"Madame, I am wound up and you must bear with me. I haven't talked so much before in fifty years ! And besides, the worst is over now. And I'm not insisting on an answer. I only ask you to think it over. I myself have been thinking of little else for a number of weeks. I have been your neighbour in this building for nearly a year, and you have been so gracious as to admit me to a certain intimacy ; our musical companionship has, I believe, given me some knowledge of your character. And since I'm really nothing but an old child, I've started dreaming. I don't want to talk about what it would mean to me, that's the least important part of the story. . . . But you are all alone, these days, your son has flown from the nest, he's far away and making a career for himself in the Provinces. . . . I've quite realised that he was your chief care, the love of your life—which comes to the same thing—and simply from hearing you speak his name : 'My little Dominique . . .' I've guessed the serious and responsible existence you've

led because of him. But now that great moment in a mother's life is past : the moment when her child becomes a man. . . . It's over, the torch is no longer in your hand. Your son is only eighteen, but he's earning his own living . . . young people start earning so soon these days. . . . He's far from you. He's independent. He lives by himself. It's like someone going off on a steamer ; the mothers remain on shore. . . . All this winter you've been waving a farewell handkerchief . . . a handkerchief which I shrewdly suspect was damp with tears. . . . But now it's time to go home, to begin life again. You are so upright and so youthful with your fine health and your pink cheeks ! Half your life is still before you. I know I have nothing to offer but an ugly name and an appearance that isn't much to boast of, but . . . "

" Monsieur Coquineau . . . "

" Hear me to the end, Madame."

" No, Monsieur Coquineau, it is useless."

" Useless ! "

" Monsieur Coquineau, I am already married."

" Married."

" And I'm amazed that you should not know it. I am married . . . "

" Indeed ! . . . separated perhaps ? "

"Not in the least bit in the world. My husband and I are an exceedingly happy couple."

Monsieur Coquineau looks around him in speechless astonishment: he is looking for the husband.

"My husband is unfortunately not at home so often as he would wish. He is constantly on the move. He's a reporter. His profession is what is called special reporting. You must surely have read articles by him, signed Jean Casse."

"Jean Casse. . . . Yes, of course."

"He only stays here for short periods. Breathing spaces. He was with me for twenty four hours six months ago on his way from Ireland to Moscow. But, Monsieur Coquineau, how did you get the idea. . . . I must certainly have mentioned him to you."

"Yes, Madame, you did. You showed me various curios, weapons, photographs, and you said: 'My husband brought me these from Manchuria . . .' or else: 'That's a snapshot that my husband took of the Sultan, Abdul Hamid . . .' But you showed those things as one shows mementoes of the dead . . . things belonging to someone who has been dead some time, and of whom one speaks with melancholy indifference. . . .

Forgive me, I'm far from wanting to hurt you . . . but I'm trying to explain. . . . It wouldn't ever have entered my head to cross-question you : I just got impressions, and when you spoke to me of your husband—and for that matter you seldom mentioned him—I got the impression that you had been left a widow very young by a husband for whom you had had very little affection. Obviously that might also apply to someone living. . . ."

Madame Casseneuil gives a little laugh.

" Then I look like a widow? . . . How very peculiar ! Let me look at myself in the glass from that standpoint."

" You used to speak to me about your son, like a mother who has no husband. You were always talking of him, you talked of him almost too much, like a woman who has nothing else left in the world. Several times you showed me your photograph album with nothing but your son in it, on every page. And then you were always worrying about his future, not only with maternal affection, but with the added weight of responsibility. One day you opened a door and said with a kind of respectful pride : ' This is Dominique's room . . . ' almost as a wife might be expected to say : ' This is my husband's study . . . ' "

"But my husband has got a study in this flat."

"You've never shown it to me."

"No . . . we so seldom use it. . . ."

"So much for imagination! I'd worked myself up with a series of pictures of your life. I saw you returning from the cemetery, leading by the hand a fair-haired uncomprehending little boy . . . or cheated of your rights among a horde of thieving lawyers. . . . And I visualised you in the headmaster's study: 'I am placing my son in your care. He is extremely intelligent, but he is delicate and must not be allowed to work too hard. . . .' And then again when he came home late, the year that he was sixteen: 'Oh, God, I haven't the authority to control him, don't let him come to grief! . . .' In all my pictures you were anxious and unhappy. I thoroughly enjoyed them. I confess that they gave me immense pleasure, because they always ended up with one in which I beheld a little man with a greying beard take your hand and say: 'All that is over and done with. The bad times are past and will never come back. Here is a faithful arm and here is an old heart that will always be young . . .' Good Lord! And that's where imagination has led me!"

" Dear Monsieur Coquineau . . . "

" And to think that you aren't even a widow ! "

" You must try to forgive me."

" And to think that I've made advances to a married woman ! I wouldn't have believed it of myself ! "

Monsieur Coquineau examines the room.

" I'm looking at your apartment. You've got a husband . . . how entirely that seems to alter it ! . . . Well, you must let me sigh one great heavy sigh, and then we'll say no more about it. Lord ! But I have been a fool ! . . . That's what comes of trusting to impressions ; one makes pictures that aren't like the truth at all."

Something in the street seems to have arrested Madame Casseneuil's attention ; she turns her head towards the open window. Then she says :

" And yet . . . Perhaps they're not so far from the truth. . . . "

III

Not so far from the truth.

For it was she who had handed over her son to the schoolmaster : " Please be careful of him, he's not at all strong. . . ." And she had thought when he reached his sixteenth year : " Perhaps I'm not severe enough with him. Supposing he got into trouble ! " She had been alone at his bedside when he had measles, alone when he had that bad bout of bronchitis. Jean Casse had been in Tokio at the time of the measles, at Tchataldja during the bronchitis. Of course she had written to him of her anxiety, written at once, but she hadn't been able to help thinking that by the time the father received the news of his child's danger, the child would be convalescent—or dead : and so the letter had been cold. It could not be impulsive, an appeal, a communion—it became merely a medium for news. She had been alone also in her rejoicings : only two places laid at the table for birthday feasts. Of course, when dessert came, they had held up their glasses and had drunk affectionately : " To father's

health ! " but there had only been the two of them there to do it.

Oh ! There is no doubt about it, special reporting is a fine profession—for a bachelor. Jean Casse adores it, and his editor encourages him because he's so efficient. He knows what to see and how to listen ; he can take the pulse of a people and scent the temper of a capital. He's a social detective. He can write what he's seen like any novelist : a novelist who never by any chance sits in his study, of course ! He's much too talented to lack employment : barely has he come into harbour, than he gets sailing orders again.

An international loafer, he is drawn by battlefields as an idler by street accidents. It isn't his fault if he seldom sits by his own fireside : the chariots of the nations are so badly driven, hardly a year passes without two of them colliding and involving pedestrians. . . .

It would be interesting to calculate how many days, in more than twenty years of married life, he has spent at home. Added together they surely wouldn't make many months. On one occasion he came back to the Rue Le Verrier in the middle of the night ; to a house where, be it understood,

everyone is in bed by ten o'clock. . . . He didn't fail to call out : " Casseneuil ! " as he passed by the porter's lodge ; but was it likely that a man should be visiting Madame Casseneuil at one o'clock in the morning ! " It must be a burglar ! " whispered Madame Chanvre in her husband's ear. And so the worthy porter, spurred by his wife and his native pluck, had leapt forth in his nightshirt and had tackled the burglar single-handed. No one was likely to forget the historic struggle on the stairs. But what of it ? Could you blame the porter and his wife for forgetting that Madame Casseneuil had a husband. . . . On another occasion much the same thing had happened : the maid had run screaming to her mistress : " Madame, there's someone getting in with a latchkey ! . . . " The maid had only been six months with Madame Casseneuil, and so, somehow, she had never realised.

There is in fact little enough about the flat to suggest the existence of a husband : a dressing gown, a few shirts and some underlinen ; not much. . . . Not even any old garments : he buys his clothes in the countries where they are well cut and gives away those he discards in order to save overweight luggage. . . . There is one pair of slippers at

least fifteen years old, but he never wears them even when he is at home. Habit : he prefers his red morocco travelling slippers that live in a little pouch. . . . The only things in the house that really belong to him are things that he hasn't used for years, things that date from the days when he was not so successful, when he was less constantly on the move. A bicycle, an old games box, an ancient typewriter and a stereoscope. . . . All of them are in the lumber room or up on the tops of cupboards. It's so long since he even thought of them. . . . They don't suggest a presence : they're mementoes. . . .

Of course, there's " the master's study." A room of which the shutters are always closed and which is only dusted once a month. Everything in it remains tidy : the files, the revolving bookcase, the paper clips, the blotter. There is clean writing paper and a new pen ; Jean Casse must be able to sit there and write the final article of his series on arriving from Vienna or New York. . . . But many more have been written in hotel bedrooms. It isn't a study that arouses respectful admiration.

Madame Casseneuil never uses it to write her letters, Dominique never goes there to do his homework. Even when friends are

invited, coffee is not brought to the study. It is only used when Jean Casse is at home, which is very seldom indeed, and even then, Dominique and his mother, it may be said without exaggeration, look around them with a shade of surprise. They don't feel altogether at ease there, not perfectly at home. Their voices are instinctively lowered. . . . Thus it will be sometimes in large country houses, where the room that belonged to some deceased member of the family is kept undisturbed.

Hadn't Monsieur Coquineau believed her to be a widow ?

Well, they aren't aggressively married, in any case. They have far too many things to tell one another. He relates his travels ; she relates her son. There certainly is no conversational unemployment when he spends a fortnight at home. And they're deeply interested in one another's affairs. But it's a constant exchange of information. They have hardly any memories in common ! It's never a conversation where anything can be taken as said. . . .

They say : " As I wrote to you . . . —Didn't you write about it ? . . . "

And those letters . . . However far away he may be, Jean never fails to write regularly,

long and affectionate pages, but they are only letters. They reach their destination days after the cables that he sends to the papers. And so they hunt the papers for news of him. Just like any member of the public. They're no better off than any other member of the public.

When he comes home, great rejoicings. Holidays. Several times there have been complete holidays, and Dominique has stayed away from school all the while his father was at home. "His father has just returned from Constantinople. He has not seen him since the beginning of the Turko-Bulgarian war, and he is leaving for Greece at the end of the week." With the exception of Jean himself, who is never perturbed and who alights from the train as calmly in Paris as in Pekin or London, everyone is rather excitable : Dominique bombards his father with questions, Madame Casseneuil hustles the cook and they evolve surprises ; Jean invites his Paris colleagues, old friends, with whom he can so seldom foregather ; various liqueurs make their appearance and there are walks on the boulevards ; they go to a theatre. . . . "Come and do my errands with me"—says Jean—"I've so little time to spend with you !" And off they go in a

taxi. He takes them into newspaper offices. They suddenly hear a lot of noise and see hordes of people. . . . During that week Madame Casseneuil cancels the chamber music. One might say that she cancels most of her customary habits. But she rediscovers one that she seemed to have mislaid—the habit of love.

And it's all of it rather disturbing. One gets rather tired. It doesn't last long enough to become familiar. It's even . . . well, yes, it is decidedly upsetting. One is as it were carried away, rather breathless, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry. " What am I to do about it, Madame ? " grumbles the maid incessantly, finding her cranks disregarded. " It's not I that can tell you, my good girl," replies Madame Casseneuil. A woman who generally can be trusted to know her own mind !

When Jean has departed, she gradually finds her level again. She says to the maid : " Now we must try to economise." She feels as though she has been entertaining a country cousin, a cousin of whom one is extremely fond and for whom one has taken a lot of trouble, but who has none the less caused rather an upheaval. . . .

And then the flat in the Rue Le Verrier

returns to its normal peaceful monotony. One forgets that Jean has passed that way. The moment comes when the strong tenacious odour of the cigars he smoked no longer clings to the folds of the curtains.

IV

Monsieur Coquineau was perfectly right : in Madame Casseneuil's photograph album one sees only photographs of her son.

Not one of her husband. It isn't that she doesn't possess any. On the contrary, she has any number of them : when Jean Casse descends on the Rue Le Verrier, it requires an entire evening to see all the snapshots that he has brought back with him from his travels. The three of them cluster round the lamp, Jean looks at the little piece of paper and mutters : " Now what in the world was that one ? . . . Oh, yes, I know : it's a street in Smyrna . . . and there was such a jolly little urchin. . . . Look at him, there he is on the left, but he moved and his head's all blurred. . . . " He laughs at the memory, passing the photograph to Dominique who hands it on to his mother. . . . It's only his personal memory, you see. He has to explain everything. Not that the mother and son aren't interested ; they ask questions : " Where was this ? And what's that little black speck ? " But only the father can reply,

and in the end it all becomes rather like a magic lantern lecture.

But how well Madame Casseneuil knows the few little snapshots she has of her son ! This one only shows a strip of beach without any landscape, nothing but a stretch of sand and water ; but you could take your oath on her not confusing it with any other ! And the one in which a man is bending over a child ; his features are lost in the shadow cast by his panama : but she knows that it is Monsieur Frambouhans, who was such a friend of Dominique's fifteen years ago. . . . She herself doesn't appear in many of them—she used to say : " No, no ! Don't take me, take the children." But she was never far away, all the same. Even when he was made to stand by himself, Dominique wasn't alone : she barely left him for a moment ; she is standing behind the photographer, always rather moved—yes, over so trifling a matter as the taking of a photograph—smiling encouragement at her child. She has only withdrawn a few paces, as one does with an infant that is learning to walk, with arms extended to catch him if he falls.

In Madame Casseneuil's bedroom there is a large photograph of Jean. She looks at it when she is writing to him ; she gazes at

it when she has to make a decision regarding Dominique. A serious decision that ought to be made by a man. . . . But as for the little travel snapshots, as soon as Jean has handed them round, he puts them back in their envelope. The envelope lies about on his desk after he's gone, and presently it gets put away among the files, in the one that is labelled "sundries."

The album was especially purchased for the photographs of Dominique. Some of them might easily have got spoilt or mislaid. . . . Madame Casseneuil keeps an eye on the maid's activities ; gives her a hand now and again, she rather enjoys dusting her own treasures. And so she dusts the round table, on which there are statuettes, a vase, a glass vessel in the shape of a butterfly —and the album. . . . An album always seems to gape, it doesn't close properly, it opens of its own accord. . . . And so Madame Casseneuil tucks her duster under her arm, takes up the magnifying glass and turns over the pages. An hour wasted. Wasted ? Not a bit of it. Is any hour wasted in which one is completely happy ? Emotion and pride— the pride of authorship. Each year of her son's life is like a separate story. She turns over the pages with deliberation.

A fair-haired child haunts them, growing taller page by page. He begins stark naked on a velvet chair ; one must be a mother to see any beauty in that : a bald head, pudgy feet and an open mouth. He finishes in a well cut lounge suit and a soft felt hat, sitting at the wheel of a motor. . . . Fifty pictures in which he reigns supreme, even when he is a tiny child lost among a crowd of grown-up people. Such big people they are : the gentleman whose beard he so enjoyed pulling when he was three years old, the little girl to whom he became engaged at six, his bicycle, a road along which he used to ride. . . .

Since he went away, the sunshine of the house dwells in those pages. The panacea for depression is to open the album. His gentle handsome features. His honest expression. He hasn't changed at all : the naked infant and the young motorist have the same innocent eyes. It does one good to look at them. Everything is pure and wholesome because a mother looks at her child.

She pauses at the photographs which show him on the beach, in the shadow of a haystack or on the grey balcony of the Rue Le Verrier. The beach was frequently swept by icy gales ; the balcony of the Rue Le Verrier

was sometimes drenched by dismal rain. . . . She remembers only the peaceful twilights on the sea shore, the healthy delights of summer haymaking, the enjoyment of lingering on the balcony. Even the people, thanks to her child, are remembered with indulgence : Monsieur Frambouhans, the man in the panama who bends over the little boy, was a banker who came to a bad end. Certainly Madame Casseneuil has been told that he made dishonest use of his client's money ; but she has forgotten the fact. She only remembers that Dominique at three years old dearly loved to pull his beard. And so, every time she comes across his photograph she smiles on the old ruffian with spontaneous affection.

And you, little girl whom Dominique wanted to marry when he was six. . . . Madame Casseneuil looks at you when she thinks with emotion and a touch of premature jealousy of the woman who will one day be Dominique's wife—soon, perhaps—at any rate in five or six years' time. You will certainly not be that woman, but she cannot think of her without visualising your face, and she ascribes to you all the virtues she would wish her to have.

They lost sight of you almost immediately

after they had met you one summer at Trestraou. You were charming with your dark, cropped hair, your masterful ways and your green rompers. And Dominique had loved you, perhaps because you were so pretty, or possibly because of the way you ordered him about. He obeyed you with shamed enjoyment, and when your tyranny humbled him, he blushed with mingled delight and embarrassment. He gave in to you only too gladly, but with a sidelong glance at the grown-ups to see whether they remarked his weakness. Of the two of you, he was undeniably the girl.

Your father, Monsieur Verdales, was a big portly man. Heavens, he was fat ! He had lumpy fingers that defied rings ; a tiny little nose in the middle of a vast round face in which his eyes looked like two dots made by an undecided compass tracing a circle. He had so immense a double chin that his real chin, small and pointed, had the appearance of a minute excrescence. He always kept a handkerchief slipped in between his neck and his collar, like a violinist, though no one would have expected him to play the violin. He had a delightful profession, that of a window dresser at the Paradis. It was hard to believe it when one looked at his hands,

and yet it was perfectly true. He designed window displays. Arranged handkerchiefs in ingenious patterns, created skilful cascades of materials, conceived happy marriages between boxes of notepaper and feather fans. Truly an art in itself and one in which Monsieur Verdales was justly renowned.

The old, old story. When the holidays came to an end, after the farewells at which you wept while Dominique, controlling his tears, was probably the more unhappy of the two, you both swore to meet again. You had told Dominique that you sometimes played in the Tuileries. But possibly you never went there in the winter. For a whole month, come frost come rain, Dominique dragged his mother there every afternoon, and never once found you. He endured a bitter disappointment that he was half ashamed to reveal. When December was at hand he said : " Mother, I would so much like to go to the Paradis. . . . " Since it was the season of Christmas presents, she naturally took him to the toy department ; he barely glanced at them. He wanted to go outside. There he had remained, glued to the pavement, quite pale, his eyes wide open, riveted upon the artistic display provided by a frieze of parasols with fancy

handles and an immense blue and white peacock composed of bath towels. . . . Surely the fat, skilful fingers of your father had created that wonder ? It was almost like seeing you again. . . .

In the photograph you are standing jauntily in your green rompers, with your head thrown back and a look of defiance. Dominique is slightly behind you, his head inclined towards his left shoulder ; he has a timid, rather anxious little smile—such a darling ! Fragile, altogether a " mother's child "—— He is like that now. He looks almost the same in the last photograph which shows him at the wheel of his motor. And yet he is a man. A man who earns his own living, and who represents the Bog Motor Company at Avignon—yes, indeed, a man, more than eighteen years old.

A child, a child. . . . The same charming features, no moustache, clear innocent eyes ; his head still inclines to the left shoulder and he still has that timid, rather anxious smile —such a darling ! A young face, a pure face—an undefiled spring. . . .

And an entire hour has been wasted, a happy hour, the duster under the arm, the magnifying glass in hand, and the album . . .

" A telegram, Madame. . . ."

Telegrams have long ceased to disturb Madame Casseneuil : her husband has sent so many ! Sometimes he informs her : " Will be in Paris in a week's time. All my love." Or perhaps : "Compelled to go on to Korea. Letter follows. Bless you." Madame Casseneuil merely says to the maid :

" Very well. Put it down there."

And she goes on examining the photograph through the magnifying glass. The telegram hasn't even obliterated the tender smile from her lips. She is still quietly absorbed by a little six year old Dominique on the beach at Trestraou. . . . How right she is, how wise. . . .

" Avignon.—Dominique seriously injured in motor accident. . . ."

Ah ! . . . He is dead.

V

She has barely walked a hundred paces, from the Paris taxi to the train, from the train at Avignon to the fly with rubber tyres—and yet she has an impression of having run, and run, and run ! . . . her legs are trembling, her heart thumps, and she has the pallor of one who has run for miles.

Dominique's bedroom. His bed. But where is Dominique ? . . . He is there, but they have covered him with a sheet. Why ? A woman's voice has murmured—

" Better not look at him. . . . It was the head that was injured, and so . . ."

" Never mind that. I want to see him."

The landlady's answer :

" Better not, madame . . . better not . . ."

And then the sound of a man's voice. A voice that combines gentleness with authority. It says :—

" No. And you mustn't remain here, Madame. I will take you to an hotel. Tomorrow . . ."

And she wails, shaking her head :

"I want to see him . . . I don't want to leave him . . ."

But she is so weak, so utterly exhausted. She hasn't even enough strength left to will what she so much desires. She allows herself to be taken by the arm. She is so weak. . . . And then the man's authority carries conviction. She has been so little accustomed to a man's authority, she who has practically lived alone as mistress of her home ; the virile hand on her arm is unfamiliar ; and so she instinctively obeys the unknown man. What does he look like ? She doesn't know. She must have looked at him when she answered him : "Yes, yes, very well . . ." and yielded to his command, but she did not see him, because of the tears in her eyes. . . .

And why is she in this hotel bed ?

It is very hot. A stifling air filters through the slats of the venetian shutters, and permeates the room like heavy smoke. It must be nearly ten o'clock in the evening. From time to time echoes from the orchestra which plays at the big café on the corner of the street fall into the room through the shutters like letters into a post box.

How has she contrived to undress and get into bed ? . . .

In the train the jolting of the line shook the wooden acorns of the ceiling light so that they rattled against the circular glass ; they made a queer noise like uncorking a bottle. She can still hear it, only now the knocking is on her temple.

She once heard Jean say : " There are so many motor accidents ; a motor's nothing but a thirty h.p. hearse. . . ."

In the hotel passage two waiters are whispering : " I'm not so almighty keen on the ten per cent system. We used to make more than that on tips."—" You're right ; but if you waylay clients when they're leaving and look at them hard enough . . . plenty of them haven't the face not to tip you."

" Better not look at him. . . . It was the head that was injured, and so . . ."

At midday the lady in brown, who had the corner seat, took her luncheon out of her dressing case. She had hard-boiled eggs, a wing of chicken, cherries, and salt in a screw of tissue paper. She sat sideways and pretended to be looking out of the window. She was ashamed to show that she was eating. The man in the dustcoat had lunched in the restaurant car ; he had come back flushed and with hiccups. Out of his bag he had taken a bottle wrapped in a napkin, and

while they were in a tunnel he had drunk three glasses, one after the other.

Oh, oh, Dominique's beautiful, innocent eyes ! . . . But it was the head that was injured. . . . A motor's nothing but a thirty h.p. hearse. . . .

Toc ! The wooden acorns against the glass lamp. And just then a road that went uphill, all white under the blazing sun ; it looked like a thirsty lolling tongue. The lady in brown had explained that she was going to Marseilles to visit her children. . . . No, it was the big fair woman who was visiting her children.

The waiters are whispering in the passage : " The biggest outrage is that we should have to supply blacking and brushes for the clients' shoes. As prices go these days ! . . . Though for that matter, here in the South, we aren't so badly off as we might be. . . . There's practically no rain ; never any mud on the shoes, only dust : a good rub with a cloth and they're shiny enough for a client. . . . And what's more, the Lord didn't provide me with spit so that I should have to buy blacking. . . ."

Why, oh why did he ever drive a car ! She had been scared from the first. But he had smiled : " Come off it, mother, it's our

generation ! . . . We don't sit at home writing verses at fifteen." And he was right, all his friends were the same. At fifteen, he wasn't writing verses but he had a motor. Or at any rate, a share in one. Four of them had clubbed together to buy it ; they'd taken up savings, done odd jobs, and sold their old school books, and when they'd collected a big enough sum, the four of them had bought a second-hand sports model. He had learnt to drive on the sly, and one day he had turned up in the Rue Le Verrier. He had sat there hooting and hooting like the people who come to fetch their friends for a Sunday outing ; and presently there were heads at all the windows of the quiet street. Madame Casseneuil had been one of the last to look out. He had shouted up to her : " Good morning, mother ! . . ." and had started to turn round. She had screamed with fear, as though the motor were moving of its own volition and were going to crush her son against a wall.

" Don't be frightened, mother, I could turn on a pocket handkerchief ! "

Two people have come into the next room. A man and a woman.

" A motor's nothing but a thirty h.p. hearse."

A shred of music through the slats of the shutters. Heavy, inconsiderate steps in the next room. . . .

When they met and passed another train, it made a silky sound : vrrr, like sharpening one knife on another. The man in the dustcoat had spoken to her once. He must have remarked her wide-open eyes and thought that she was listening. . . . He had said—odd how her brain must have registered his words—he had said :

" That's what I always say, all these folks, these employés and officials, just a pack of loafers : the last thing in the world the man at the ' Enquiries ' desk expects is to have to answer enquiries. So I jolly well give the beggars something to do ! When I've got a spare hour, I go into a bank, always perfectly civil, seemly, hat in hand. ' I beg your pardon, but would you be so kind as to inform me ? ' And I keep them standing on one leg, for an hour ! He, he ! . . . And the concierges ! . . . I never go into a house without stirring them up a bit : ' Mr. So-and-So. On what floor ? ' or if I'm too well known : ' Will you find out if Mr. What's-his-name is at home ? ' Always with a smile. On the metro I always travel first with a second class ticket ; that means that

the guard has to get out his block, mark my ticket with a blue pencil and give me change. And then, when I write a letter, I don't just put one twenty-five centime stamp in the usual way; I put twenty-five one centime stamps on the envelope; that means twenty-five postmarks to cancel them! The post office officials get their salaries, don't they? Then why shouldn't they do some work for them? And it gets their goat, all right—some of my letters never reach their destination. . . ."

He had never cared for violent sports, but motoring was different: it required a mere movement of the fingers to release the violence of speed. He would handle the wheel with a supple, almost a caressing gesture; the same gesture that he used to push his hair off his forehead. Later he had replaced his quarter share of the torpedo by a little cyclecar of his own. She had been unwilling, but Jean, who had returned from Athens just then had said: "But of course. Why not? . . ." and had given him the money. . . . After all, fathers are only men. . . .

There is whispering in the room next door. The man's voice, urging: "Please . . . please. . . ." The woman's voice: "No, I tell you; not now. . . ."

And then he went into Bog Motors. " Everybody's Car " . . . At first he was at the showrooms in the Avenue des Champs Elysées. It was all right there, perfectly all right : he had nothing to do. There was a valuable persian runner between two great varnished toys. A gallery with a polished wood balustrade and the telephone on a small table. Two great varnished toys : one was painted lemon yellow, the other bright scarlet. Cheerful colours. And the lovely pale grey of unused tyres. There was a smell of leather that came from the big arm-chairs, a smell of Egyptian cigarettes that came from the boredom that made Dominique smoke so much, and a smell of expensive scent that came from the little typist. . . . That was motoring after a mother's own heart !

It must be late. A footstep sounds on the pavement. Next door : " No, I tell you . . . can't you let me alone . . ." says the woman ; and the man repeats insistently : " Please . . . please . . . "

The ticket collector had boarded the train. He had said : " Madame, I really must trouble you for your ticket ! . . . I've already asked for it three times ! . . . " Had he asked for it three times ? It was quite possible that he had. . . . A little later, the man in the

dustcoat went to the toilet. When he returned to the compartment his clothes exhaled an intolerable and pungent odour. . . .

And then had come that evening when Dominique had said : " Listen, mother . . ." Before he had uttered another word she had felt a sword enter her side, there, to the left. His long eyelashes—he had such beautiful long sweeping lashes—his long eyelashes had half shaded his eyes. " That's what they're offering me. . . . And of course it's a splendid opening for my future career. Perfectly marvellous : to be their representative in Avignon . . . only think what any youngster, with some *nous*, could make of it . . . and they throw in a garage . . . "

What's that ? Someone has moaned. Who is moaning ? . . . Oh, good God ! It's next door . . . again . . . faugh !

" But, my darling, only think . . . "

Think of what ? She hadn't known. Think of everything that one couldn't know. Of everything that might happen. That does happen . . . ! But he had repeated stubbornly : " After all, one must set about really earning a living . . . " ; he had even added : " I'm sure father would say I was right, if he were here. . . . " Yes, he had brought in his absent father, against her ! . . . But she

had always known that the wrench would have to come some day. All sons break away from their mothers. She had been resigned. She had only murmured : " Avignon sounds so far away ! . . . " He had burst out laughing : " Far away, Avignon ? But it's only a day's run in the car, mother ! . . . " A day's run in the car . . .

" A motor's nothing but a thirty h.p. hearse . . . "

She ought never to have given in ! Never ! . . . Or at any rate she should have followed him. But she hadn't wanted to be a tiresome mother. She had been idiotically shy ! She had said : " But you'll be all alone there. . . . I don't quite see how I could live there with you. . . . A move's a big undertaking . . . when your father comes back he may wish me to be here. . . ." She had only been fishing for an invitation. . . . And he hadn't taken the hint ! Not a bit of it ! He had answered without a moment's hesitation: " Oh ! but that won't matter. . . . " Oh, if only she hadn't given in . . . if only she'd held out. . . .

What time is it ? . . . There hasn't been a sound for ages. . . . At last a breath of cool breeze through the slats of the shutters ; a clock strikes the hour. . . .

"A motor's nothing but a thirty h.p. hearse. . . ."

How endlessly, intolerably long a night can be! . . .

VI

"Jean, I'm writing to you. How terribly I wish you were here ! I am in Dominique's room. All alone. Whenever I can stop thinking of him, I think of you ; I can see you in your travelling suit and your light grey hat with your overcoat on your arm, your cigarette and your composure that notices everything and is never surprised . . . as we have so often seen you, both of us, too often perhaps. . . . When will you get the telegram I sent you ? At this moment when the greatest misfortune in the world has befallen us, you are wearing your travelling suit and you are quite composed . . . Oh ! It's foolish of me, and I know it ; but when I visualise you like that I get an impression that you don't care . . . And so I'm writing. Just as though I were talking to you. Just as though you were here. I simply had to. I was collecting some of Dominique's things to take away with me and I had to leave off and write to you. It suddenly seemed imperative ; so I left the cupboard open and came to Dominique's little desk. Look, I'm

still holding in my left hand a kind of dressing gown I had just taken off a peg, a kimono—he'd been and bought himself a kimono, the poor baby ! . . .

" You ought to be here, Jean. There were so many things in his life that I know of and you don't. Little things, but so many of them; so many memories of him that you'll never have ! But the memory of this day, Jean, I mustn't be alone in the terrible joy of this memory. God knows, we need to share that memory. It would be too horrible if, when you come home, you should have to say to me : ' Tell me about it . . . ' and I should have to tell of your child's death, as to a stranger.

" No, I'm going to write everything, shall I ? Everything that I see, everything that I'm thinking. So that you'll know. So that we shall have been here together. For you did love your son, didn't you ?

" I am looking around me because I want to describe it all to you. It's very difficult : I have to concentrate so much in order to see any particular thing. I realise what is there, and then my thoughts stray from my vision and I'm constantly having to bring them back again.

" This is a fairly large room with a

communicating dressing room. It isn't very attractive. There are two chairs, and two arm-chairs upholstered in red velvet. A table and the desk I'm writing at. The walls are papered in yellow with little sprays of blue flowers and the bed is in a recess. . . . The bed, Jean ; he was lying on it yesterday, covered with a sheet. . . .

" There are very few of his things. He had taken the room furnished, of course ; I don't suppose they even let him change the wallpaper. It's almost like a room in a hotel. But he had hung up a few pictures, reproductions of paintings and statuary. There's one just above this desk : ' Apollo, from the antique.' He was always artistic, our poor darling. There are three books lying about, his cigarette holder, our photograph on the mantelpiece, a photograph of us together, you and I, arm in arm . . . and somehow that helps my sorrow.

" A sorrow beyond all words, Jean, as you will understand. I loved him so utterly, my darling, so entirely . . . I don't believe it's possible to love more than I loved him. And yet, in this sorrow of mine there is something . . . I don't know how to say it . . . oh ! I don't need to tell you how hard t is to find words . . . there is something

that prevents it from being quite unendurable. Sons die and their mothers do manage to survive them. So you see, there must be something, mustn't there? I think it's because we have so often mourned them beforehand. When our son dies, it can never be entirely unexpected; he dies for us as soon as he leaves our arms. For us he is exposed to every conceivable danger the moment he begins to be independent. He is dead when he forgets to write, he is dead when he's five minutes late, he is dead when he crosses a street. When he really does die, it's only a repetition. We have grown accustomed to it.

"And so, just now, when I took his clothes out of the wardrobe, I was able to weep tears that had no bitterness in them. They were already a consolation. I was holding in my hands all his poor dear familiar things, his silk socks, his ties, a flannel waistcoat, and the thought came to me that they were relics . . . I was able to be moved by such a thought, so soon! But, oh! I am terribly unhappy!

"Nevertheless, I can feel within me the picture beginning to arise, upon which my eyes will dwell for all the remainder of my life; the picture of my child who is dead.

I can summon the strength to behold this room where Dominique spent his last days on earth ; it has the attraction that dwells in all memories, even those that are most appalling. These red upholstered easy chairs, this window with its small balcony ; the house opposite, the wallpaper, the reproduction of the nude Apollo : ' from the antique,' the little desk at which I am writing, the bed in the recess where I saw him lying, the sheet drawn over his face ; all that becomes a part of me, for ever. . . . Everything : the sound of two women talking downstairs, two church bells ringing against each other, the very air of the street—it's blazing hot and I've left the window open—the smell of the room, a faint remnant of Eau de Cologne, I think mixed with more recent carbolic. I can accept all that ; the sight of the bed, the smell of carbolic acid . . . just because henceforward I am going to live with them. Just because, although I shall go out of this room presently, I shall be living in it all the rest of my life ! I shall be far from it but I shall never leave it. Here are the chairs in which I shall sit, the sounds that I shall hear, the only odours that will reach my consciousness ! I shall be living here, with my child. He will turn back the

sheet and get up from that bed, he will use that cigarette holder and go through that open window on to the balcony. He will listen to the rival church bells and look at the picture of Apollo. And I shall be with him. My darling ! . . . The only happiness I can ever find again will be in this room ! . . ."

Madame Casseneuil drops the pen because her fevered, convulsed hand can no longer hold it. Is it really to her husband that she is writing ? . . .

She looks vaguely around her ; and suddenly there comes a flood of tears. She realises that she is still holding the kimono that Dominique had bought himself. She presses it despairingly to her lips : his body has dwelt in it. It seems to hold the scent of him. She showers kisses upon the gaudy silk. . . .

And then she begins to think aloud as though she were still writing. Her lips move :

"Jean, our child is dead. . . . No one seems to know how. They found his car in a ditch and he was thrown far from it, against a tree. I wanted to see the road, but I hadn't the strength : I was feverish. . . . But I shall go later on. You may be sure of that ! It's near a village called Barbentane. . . ."

And then she stops thinking because for a

long time she can only see, there, before her eyes, the unknown road. . . .

" Our child, Jean ! . . . He was so dear, so beautiful ! Everyone loved him. Even here, where he had been for so few months, he had already made friends. Real friends. Just now, in the church, a man came and took me by the hand : he had been crying. . . ."

Futilities :

" His landlady was called Madame Garrigues. . . ."

Then tears. . . .

The minutes go by. Downstairs the two women are still talking. The bells ring on. There are so many bells in Avignon-of-the-Churches. This morning there was a bell tolling for someone dead. All the bells are mourning him.

Madame Casseneuil throws the window wider open. She feels calmer ; she resumes her task. On the shelves and in the drawers, all Dominique's little possessions. . . . It takes a long time : each thing is so precious !

If she dared, she would gather up the ashes that have remained in the onyx ashtray. To be able to take everything away with her ; closely held against her heart ! In the drawer of the desk, a block of grey-blue writing paper. . . . Nothing

written on it. But how precious it is, none the less. . . . His paper. The paper on which he might have written so many more letters !

And here are letters that were written to him. Madame Casseneuil recognises her own handwriting. The darling child, how carefully he treasured his mother's letters ! He loved her. But what a number ! Did she write him as many as all that ? Very probably. And if she hadn't controlled herself for fear of boring him, wouldn't she have written a great many more !

But wait a minute : the packet is large because there are other letters among her own. Here is an unfamiliar handwriting :

" My very dear one, will you come tomorrow ? . . . I do so utterly need to see you. . . ."

A love affair ? Yes, these are undoubtedly love letters.

Somewhere, then, somewhere else, another woman mourns him ? . . . Another woman weeping for Dominique. . . . Madame Casseneuil is both touched and wounded. A jealous impulse followed by one of pity : all mothers are alike. Somewhere there is a girl who had grown to love Dominique ? Poor, poor child !

Madame Casseneuil achieves a wavering smile of compassion.

Poor, poor girl ! Where is she ? There was no woman weeping this morning, in church. . . . Who can she be ?

Madame Casseneuil turns once more to the letters which she had laid down. " My very dear one, will you come tomorrow ? . . ." She must have been a humble, uneducated girl : she doesn't know how to spell. She writes " The day after tomorrow, I shall have to go to Nîmes. . . ." The masculine gender : " je suis forcé de partir pour Nîmes. . . ." But faults of spelling don't amount to much ! She was probably very pretty. And then, she loved Dominique ; it's easy to see that her letters are ardent. . . .

" My very dear, how happy I am if only . . ."

Happy ? Heureux ? Again the wrong gender !

" For a man such as I am, you see, my very dear . . ."

A man ?

And then, suddenly, one single phrase . . .

God ! a man ! . . . Dominique ! Dominique ! . . . The abomination of it ! . . .

With an instinctive gesture she draws the curtain across the open window.

VII

Avignon is a most enchanting town ; even its breezes seem lighthearted. Its streets are thronged with idlers ; the very shopkeepers appear to have entered their premises by chance and in the principal shopping street great awnings are stretched from one pavement to the other throwing the fruit, the materials and the humble household wares into an orange or crimson shadow. One would almost think the street was hung with flags. There is a festive atmosphere ; the cafés are crowded ; on the terrace of the square people stand about for hours as though they were expecting a procession, and the ramparts, greyed but not disfigured by the centuries, look as though they had been newly erected for an exhibition. Another miracle : even the barracks do not appear forbidding. The sun is so radiant. The dust is so clean, and the whole is swept by a fine, healthy wind.

Madame Casseneuil has crossed this cheerful town.

A railway station is always a railway

station, and any one of them is exactly like another ; when one has reached the station one may be said to have begun one's journey. But she wants no delay, no delay. . . . She sees cyclists passing on the white road, over sturdy little bridges that span the conduits ; she sees little gardens that tell of humble happiness ; hedges of cypress protecting the fields from the mistral . . . the country that leads to Barbentane. . . . No more delay ! Will the train never be here !

" Madame Casseneuil ? "

Monsieur Amédée Charruge is a rather stout gentleman. It is a misfortune to be stout when the weather is torrid and one is the bearer of condolences. One yearns imperatively to blow hard and to mop one's forehead with a large handkerchief, but the impulse must be repressed as undignified. Monsieur Amédée Charruge is undeniably better adapted to a more cheerful rôle. A jolly soul, his hat on the back of his head and his hand always ready to slap you on the shoulder. His stomach is adorned with a watchchain of such dimensions that you might suppose it restrained a dog rather than a chronometer. His entire aspect is suggestive of conviviality.

But on this occasion he is burdened with

condolences. He happens to be the South of France representative of the Bog Motor Company ; Dominique—whom, by the way, he had never set eyes on—had been so to speak his subordinate, and Monsieur Bog had sent him a wire of instructions. And so : " The terrible bereavement that has befallen you . . . your son had in so short a time gathered golden opinions . . . I could not refrain from . . ."

" Thank you, Monsieur."

The lady is certainly not over gracious. Worthy Monsieur Amédée Charruge, cut short in his uneasy eloquence, casts an eye of desperate appeal towards the three or four gentlemen who have accompanied him on his mission : he has the honest unhappy expression of a dog that has misbehaved. He resumes his task. Perhaps he wishes to feel that he has earned that long cold " bock " with which he shortly intends to reward himself. He certainly shows some courage : a lady who holds herself stiffly erect, who barely troubles to reply and whose eyes never waver from the direction of the incoming train, while her twitching fingers suggest that you are getting on her nerves ! . . . He makes a final effort : he has learnt that she has expressed a very natural desire

to visit the place where . . . in fact the site of the disaster . . . should she still desire it, she could take the evening train, and he would be only too . . . Good God ! He has almost said only too happy ! . . . He would consider it an honour to accompany her in his car. . . .

" No, Monsieur, I thank you. Thank you very much."

Ungracious. Most ungracious. Well, so much the better ; the road to Barbentane in this blazing heat ! . . . Hardly as pleasant as an iced drink on the terrace of the Café des Négociants.

" Ah ! the train at last ! "

Madame Casseneuil has been unable to repress the exclamation. For that matter, Monsieur Amédée Charruge is quite as thankful : the train at last ! . . . she springs into it like one seeking to escape. All the gentlemen bare their heads respectfully. She makes a slight gesture of acknowledgement but does not look at them. She vanishes in the corridor.

" Let's have a drink "—says Monsieur Amédée Charruge to his companions, freely mopping his perspiring brow. " Let's have a drink. And if you want to know what I think of the woman . . . well, she can't have

cared much for the poor kid. . . . And as for her manners, why she never once even looked in your direction."

No, Monsieur Amédée Charruge, she never once looked in their direction. How careful she was to avert her gaze ! She was in terror lest an inadvertent glance should fall upon them. She was thinking . . . What are these men ? . . . Why are they here ? Among them there might be, there surely must be he who . . .

Ah, dear God ! She must not, will not see him ! . . .

VIII

Her life was a very simple one. In the mornings the ordering of meals, the supervision of her household and Mass on Sundays ; in the afternoon, reading or needlework, visits to friends or relations, occasional shopping, but not of a frivolous nature. Shopping was an undertaking, not a diversion. Twice a month the friends and relations were entertained. In the evening, more reading or the piano, and on Tuesdays chamber music with the aid of Monsieur Coquineau's 'cello and Mademoiselle Lingostière's violin. And then, her letters to Dominique. . . .

She would shut herself up to write them in the boy's own room. It was there that she also liked to sew or read. She sat there far more often than elsewhere. She would draw the arm-chair up to the window. People who love deeply have strange reserves : they don't care to admit how deeply they love ; and so she would pretend that she sat there because the light was better . . . and not because in that room she basked in thoughts

of her son. They were not thoughts that interfered with her reading, but they none the less pervaded her being. She had so often sought that room when he had been at home ! Every evening. When he had been little, to hush him to sleep, to comfort him after a nightmare ; later, to kiss him good-night, to hear all over again the story of his day's activities ; to help him fold his clothes neatly ; later still to put a hand on his forehead and murmur : " How late you are sitting up, my darling. You surely needn't work so hard as all that . . ." ; and not long ago, she would go there with a touch of anxiety in order to be certain that he was really there. . . . A hundred times a day, for no reason at all, or for some cause too vague for definition, she would seek reassurance in that room. Eternal anxiety of mothers who know that their son must change. They await the moment, almost unconsciously. And she would go to that room for knowledge. Oh ! not to spy in the pockets of discarded clothing, but because of an instinct that told her that the room itself would seem different when any change came over Dominique.

While he was still in Paris, at the showrooms of the Bog Motor Company, she used not to sit in the room, but she would wander

round it. She would tidy the books, put flowers in a vase, alter the position of some ornament. It gave her a feeling of security : he still belonged to her. To set her mark on his room was like sharing it with him, brought him nearer. From the moment he had gone to Avignon she had not moved a single thing ; she just sat in the arm-chair. . . .

She still leads the same simple life. The same, except for her black dress. . . .

Exactly the same. And immediately. If there were any hitches in the course of the first days, they were not of her making. They were owing to other people, who naturally could not be expected to understand. . . . During the first week, every time that Madame Casseneuil passed the porter's lodge, Madame Chanvre, the porter's wife, stopped talking, out of respect, and assumed the expression reserved for the passing of funerals. Françoise the maid did likewise when she first saw Madame Casseneuil after her return from Avignon. She wanted to express her sympathy but didn't quite know how to do it ; she ventured with bowed head :

" I thought I'd make you a cup of chocolate, Madame . . . "

And all that day, her shrill peasant voice,

attuned to jollities and open-air arguments, was subdued and deferential: "Yes, Madame . . . Very well, Madame . . ." in an almost inaudible murmur. She has also a habit, at ordinary times, of talking to herself as she sweeps, or peels the vegetables; one hears her sighing, grumbling: "That's that!" . . . or "Drat the sun, it gets on my nerves!" . . . or "Automatic sweeper indeed! I don't think! and that's the tenth time it's gone out of order . . ." or else: "There's my sink run dry again! . . ." and not infrequent profanity. But for some days she worked in silence. The sun blazed, the rubber belt of the sweeper broke, the bottom of the saucepan burnt itself out without incurring a word of reproach. She still sighed occasionally, but it was when she looked at Madame: when she served her at meals, brought her hot water, or when she enquired: "What shall we have for luncheon to-day?" The sighs became merely a tactful manner of saying that she sympathised and was ready to receive confidences. . . . And then, to behold Madame breaking her bread just as usual and to hear her replying in exactly her usual practical tones: "Tell the butcher to give us a pound and a half of steak, and not one ounce more. . . ." Very

soon Françoise ceased her repressions. One hears her once more grumbling as usual, inveighing against the sun, the gas and the automatic sweeper.

It is harder to defend oneself against the sympathy of friends. Some of them have written. Oh ! Those letters ! . . . They would only be endurable to someone with tears in her eyes. But Madame Casseneuil has no tears to shed : she reads them therefore with a full understanding of all their pitiful indifference. Worse than these are the callers. Ten ladies who have thought it their duty to go and see " That poor Madame Casseneuil " between tea at the confectioner's and an evening at the Capucines. Ten ladies saying exactly the same thing, and to whom the same thing has had to be said. Ten ladies eager moreover to observe her sorrow. The kindest are those who are so bored with the obligation that they have arranged to meet elsewhere and make the call together.

And they expatiate: " Poor darling Dominique . . . he was so young ! . . . What an appalling disaster ! . . . He was such a dear . . . so gentle. . . . A child who never gave you a moment's anxiety. . . . I used to quote him as an example to my youngster. . . ."

And their recollections : " How I remember the time you brought him to stay with us for the holidays. . . . He was only a baby. I can still see his lovely curls. . . . "

Bygone pictures of the child . . . atrocious.

But worst of all are those occasions when she finds herself in the presence of genuine sorrow. That of Monsieur Coquineau, poor man, or that of Mademoiselle Lingostière the little violinist. They both arrived as usual on the Tuesday, but without their instruments. Neither uttered a word of sympathy. Perhaps because they were unable to do so. Monsieur Coquineau made a little sound with his tongue, such as one makes when the mouth is dry and the throat constricted ; and one felt that Mademoiselle Lingostière was silent for fear of bursting into tears. They were really and honestly unhappy, both of them. And the horror is that she cannot, no, she cannot, share their grief . . . As soon as she decently could, she asked them to leave her. Soon afterwards she begged them to resume the musical evenings. The same life, exactly the same—except that she never enters Dominique's room. . . .

IX

She does not suffer.

She cannot. Oh! how she longs to suffer! . . . Suffering would come as a normal relief. For two days she had grieved and had believed that her sorrow touched the limits of human endurance. It had been nothing at all.

All at once she had ceased to suffer. A tide of filth had submerged her being. People have written of a "mother's bowels yearning." They are perfectly right. Hers have been torn from her in one moment. She is completely void.

Nothing in her heart either. A deathly chill, a chill like the chill of ether. . . . When she thinks of her son, it is not a weight of sorrow that rises to her lips but the irrepressible, sour, foul regurgitation of utter disgust. . . .

X

Of course she had been afraid. She had always been afraid. Of Love, the arch enemy of mothers ! It is Love which has given them a son, and it is Love which they fear because Love will take him from them. But it is not an intolerable fear : there is pride and trust in it as well as jealous anxiety. There is something splendid in a son who allures ; it is so hard to believe that he has ceased to be a child ! . . .

She had always been afraid, but for a long time it had been a vague fear. She did not even give it a name. She knew only too well that the day must come . . . but surely not just yet ! . . . Every mother believes that her own son must remain pure longer than the sons of other women.

Madame Chapareillan, a friend, would relate the misdeeds of Edouard, her eldest. At fourteen he would feign innocence while making terrible remarks at meals ; at sixteen he slept out and awoke the household by coming home at six without troubling to remove his boots. " And listen to his latest.

He walked in on his father and said : ' I must have two louis. It's a debt of honour. I owe them to a madam. I had the goods and left without paying up. . . .' " She would listen and think of her own son with more tenderness than alarm : " Dominique isn't that kind of boy ! "

She had taken a dislike to her cousin, Madame Flachères. She was a worthy soul whose frank jollity had used to please her. A typical business woman with a loud voice accustomed to command—a voice that suggested a slap on the thigh. Stout and lively, rather common ; her straw-coloured hair twisted on top of her head into an erection suggestive of vermicelli ; always too much display of ruddy flesh : low neck, bare arms ; such immense arms that their nudity suggested that she had misplaced her drawers ; and what a breadth of beam : it seemed specially designed for the " danse du ventre." She sells hats in a small street leading out of the Avenue de l'Opéra. A sound establishment, not one of those little milliners' shops in which the traditional lover instals an ex-mistress. Madame Flachères moreover is a perfectly respectable woman. But she is not shocked by love affairs. Possibly she has had her little bills settled by

too many generous males? She is a good sport. Madame Casseneuil used not to hate her frank crudity. But Dominique was growing up. And Madame Flachères would say :

" Now look at that, Mathilde, your young cockerel's getting spurs ! . . . " And she would wink. Oh ! no harm meant, of course. Mere Gascon raciness :—Madame Flachères savours of Castel-Jaloux. But Madame Casseneuil hadn't liked that wink. And above all she disliked the way the other woman took to enquiring whenever they met :

" And what about your son, Mathilde . . . is he still . . . you know what? Hasn't he? . . . "

And then she would chaff Dominique. She would make those remarks that are better omitted with growing boys : " When you're fully fledged . . . " or else : " You wait a bit, my child, till you know something of women. . . . " Such remarks sting them and give them ideas. It would be : " I bet I've made Dominique blush ! . . . Now just look at that, if he isn't blushing ! . . . " Or a year later : " Dominique, come here and tell me about your conquests ! . . . And mind you whisper or your mother will hear you ! . . . " She would make him sit close to her and join her in a pretence of

confidences from which his mother was excluded. And she would join in the game with a little smile, but somehow, all the same, she didn't like it.

It was Madame Flachères who had taught him to smoke. He had tried before, on the sly, of course. But Madame Casseneuil hadn't known it.

" Come along, Dominique, have a cigarette ! "

" Thank you. . . . No, thank you,"—Dominique had answered, looking sheepish.

" Just one. Are you scared of just one little cigarette ? "

" But he has never smoked, Clementine," Madame Casseneuil had observed.

" Of course not, dear mamma ! . . . And do you really imagine that the seniors haven't put him up to it at the lycée . . . What about it, young man ? . . . He's as red as a turkey-cock ! "

" Is it true, Dominique ? "

She had felt a little twinge of pain. He was hiding something !

" But, my darling, if you really like it . . why didn't you tell me so . . . of course you can smoke. Although with anyone who isn't very strong it's a habit that would have been better avoided. . . . "

And so Madame Casseneuil had skilfully contrived to see less of her cousin while avoiding a rupture. Oh ! it wasn't that she felt any personal qualms : stout, ruddy and elderly, Madame Flachères could offer no temptation even to the most youthful and ingenuous of males. But her careless remarks, her crudity, the stories she would tell of her clients . . . What was the good of it ? . . . And then her shop . . . She had said to Dominique :

" You know, when you're in the neighbourhood of the Avenue de l'Opéra, I don't forbid you to look into the shop. . . ."

A shop where there were pretty saleswomen, attractive apprentices and smart clients. And Dominique was very definitely good-looking. . . . And so Madame Casseneuil gradually left off saying : " What about going to see Cousin Flachères on Sunday ? "

Cousin Vavrette presented a more concrete anxiety. There she was face to face with the enemy.

Thirty years old, handsome and not happy. A husband . . . It was doubtful if among the fruits of the earth, Monsieur Vavrette ever thought of anything but money. He was an antiquary. A very good trade to grow rich

in. Small, badly dressed with complete indifference, he conveyed the impression of being perpetually prepared to give a hand to a removal or to climb a ladder ; he would wriggle his arms as though about to shed his coat. He didn't look at people, he appraised them, as though they were antiques : he had an expression that suggested mathematical calculation. Fidgety he was and uneasy in a chair ; when he looked at his watch he seemed about to catch a train ; he smoked his cigarettes like an employé making the most of his lunch hour, in little hurried puffs. And his obsession of money ! When he wanted to be emphatic he would say : " I'll bet you five louis that . . . " and when he wished to congratulate a performer : " Your talent has increased quite fifty per cent . . ." He had a mannerism : he would plunge his hand into his pocket and bring it out full of small change ; he would sort out the coins on his own palm, the five-cent pieces, the big pennies, the small half-pennies, the large nickels and the small ones . . . then he would make a bird's eye reckoning : 3 francs 65, and put the money back into his pocket to fish it all out again two minutes later and resume his elaborate calculations.

Only a mannerism. But how irritating. Every time that she heard the clinking of the coins Madame Vavrette's mouth would twitch with nervous exasperation. And every time that her husband averred : " I'll bet you five louis that . . . " she would bat her eyelids. The husband never noticed, but Madame Casseneuil did. A pretty woman of thirty who is far from happy. . . .

They occupied a perfectly magnificent flat, with many more rooms than a childless couple could require, and every room was handsomely furnished. But then all the furniture in them was for sale, and not infrequently a piece would be sold. Whatever it was, if it found a purchaser. In four years of marriage Madame Vavrette had had ten different beds. The nuptial couch, a fine specimen of Louis XVI, had been bought three months after her marriage by M. le Comte d'Azergues, 53 Avenue de Wagram. She had not tried to remember his name, it had stuck in her memory. She had then sampled a bed on a dais, a Directoire bed, a Brittany peasant's bed, a Louis Philippe and the Lord knows how many others—too many beds for a woman's virtue. . . . She did not possess one thing of her own. Not one. She lived in an antique show-room.

The first comer who offered cash could remove what she liked best : the table from her dining-room, her music cabinet, or the dressing-table from her bedroom. . . . In the drawing-room stood a twisted column, gilded and broken, tall and surmounted by a mutilated statue : Monsieur Vavrette had taken it on from his predecessor and had never been able to get rid of it at any price. All antiquarians are familiar with these unsaleable pieces : they are known as " elephants." It was the one thing that Madame Vavrette could hope to retain, and so she felt a certain affection for her " elephant."

Sometimes she would be lying in her boudoir on a day-bed. The door would open : " Will you please step inside. . . . Just a moment, my love, if you don't mind ? . . . " And she would have to get up and vanish and wait in another room. When a customer appears, you see, a customer ! . . . For if there were fine pieces downstairs in the shop, the more expensive ones were kept in the flat. It was worth disturbing one's wife if one of these could be sold. On one occasion it was Madame Vavrette's at-home day ; she was receiving in her magnificently furnished salon ; the door flew

open . . . " One moment, if you please "— and Monsieur Vavrette added—" it's to see the rosewood table. . . . " The table in question was covered with tea-cups, with cakes and sweets and other paraphernalia. Monsieur Vavrette started dexterously to clear it himself. A plate of sandwiches encumbered him : " Take it, my dear, will you ? " he said, offering it to his wife. She refused to accept it and rang for a footman. The guests were silent. The client stood by the door, much embarrassed. Out of politeness everyone began to admire the table enthusiastically, as soon as the door was closed. Madame Vavrette was speechless and very near tears. . . .

No, not a happy woman. And she was already fast friends with Dominique. As cousins they called each other thee and thou. And they would join together to jeer at the husband. Dangerous ! Madame Vavrette would say : " Put your feet on this Savonnerie carpet ; you never know if it will be there tomorrow, there's a customer after it ; and won't you sit on this ottoman, it's a fine specimen with genuine antique silk upholstery ; 7,500 francs cash down."

Dominique, thrusting his hand into his pocket, would imitate Monsieur Vavrette

counting his money and would burlesque his accent, chanting: "A pargain, a pargain . . ."

And then they would laugh. . . . There was danger in that. Fortunately Madame Vavrette took a lover before Dominique was seventeen . . . and Madame Casseneuil was able to breathe again. But then came another anxiety: wasn't it possible that Dominique was hurt? He knew of the affair, as did everyone else (excepting, of course, Monsieur Vavrette). Supposing he had really cared for her a little? . . . His mother would eagerly scrutinise his features. At night she had even listened at his door, to know whether he indulged in secret sorrow. . . . But no. After all, her instinct had not misled her. Dominique was still nothing but a child. . . .

And then how afraid she had been of his school-fellows. Some of them have mistresses so frightfully early! Others, like Edouard Chapareillan, frequent bad houses. She would labour to discover the undesirables and to remove them discreetly out of Dominique's path. She would encourage Dominique to discuss his companions: "What kind of a boy is this wonderful Tossiat? What does he look like, and what's

his father's profession ? " As soon as she suspected that Dominique was making friends with anyone in particular, she would try to meet the mothers. She had been scared to death of Edouard Chapareillan, whom she always saw when she passed along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, sitting on the terrace of the d'Harcourt, a pipe in his mouth, a glass before him and a flashy girl at his side. Her terror had been that she would see her gentle Dominique led astray and getting entangled with these women. She had also feared a certain Serrières de Briord, for no particular reason unless it was because his father was noble, and an officer of Hussars : a son of Don Juan. But most of all she wanted to keep Dominique away from Taluyers.

A delightful boy, Taluyers, gentle, sensitive and intelligent. He had been to see them more than once at the Rue Le Verrier. He would talk gravely to Dominique of mathematics, history and literature. He had quite sound judgment. He was shy and correct. The child of divorced parents. His father and mother, equally guilty, had fought fiercely for the child until both lost interest in him. Madame Casseneuil had liked him immensely. She had thought : " What an

excellent friend for Dominique. . . ." and then she had learnt something which had filled her with amazement : the sixteen year old Taluyers was already a father ! . . .

Poor child, he had been in such desperate need of affection. He had met a young girl, the niece of the stationer from whom he bought pencils and exercise books. She was four or five years his senior. They had fallen in love. They had had a little girl. . . .

At sixteen ! He hadn't yet got his degree. He had had to take a room and pay the costs of the confinement. Neither of them had any money. And how can one earn a living while one is still at school ? He sold all his school books and borrowed those of his friends in order to continue his studies. He did problems for the dunces at a charge of ten sous. . . . When the day of the confinement dawned he was distracted. He didn't understand a word the master said to him. He stood petrified before the blackboard in the middle of a problem, with a glassy stare that might have been insolence.

" Look here, Taluyers, I've had enough of your impudence," scolded the master.

And he couldn't very well answer : " Excuse me, Monsieur, but my girl is having a baby. . . . "

When the little one was born there were other anxieties. How many of them ! She had whooping cough when he took his degree. And the very idea of failure was terrible. He'd have had to fall back a class and wait another year for his freedom ! . . .

He spent all the time he could with her and the child ; he made a regular habit of skimping his classes, and like many others, cut out " decorative design " altogether ; that gave him from ten to twelve twice a week. The other fellows went to a café or to play football in the Luxembourg ; he rushed home to hug his baby. To his father he feigned a sudden idleness which allowed him to pretend that he was kept in every holiday. Happy Thursdays, spent poring over his child's white little face ! He would bring her all his own childhood's toys . . . he hadn't yet had time to mislay them, he had played with them himself so very recently ! The young mother, whose father had been a labourer, would make the baby laugh by playing with its hands, " Pat a cake, pat a cake, baker's man ! . . . " and the baby would gurgle and dribble with delight. Taluyers would establish himself at the table with his French-Latin Latin-French dictionaries and sermon paper, and would

bury himself in an essay or the wars of Napoleon. When he raised his head his eyes beheld the small pale creature whom he had begotten. When the little one cried her mother would say : " Now, now, you must let your father do his lessons. . . . "

Madame Casseneuil had heard the entire story from the wife of the professor of physics whom his students had nicknamed " Panari." Madame Casseneuil and Madame " Panari " met occasionally. A fearsome man was " Panari." He had had a daughter born almost at the same time as Taluyer's, and that was how the cat had come out of the bag.

" Yes——" Madame " Panari " would tell the story—" I was in the habit of sitting with my pram in the Luxembourg at the corner of the Pépinière, you know, near the statue of Sainte Beuve. And every day a young woman would be sitting there, too, with a baby the same age as mine, but so pale ! Naturally we used to look at one another's children. And then we began to talk. And I said to my husband : ' I've made friends with such a pleasant young woman . . . I think her husband must be a schoolmaster, too.' She hadn't said so, but somehow I had got the impression. As a matter of fact, she never mentioned him ;

she could hardly admit that the child's father was a schoolboy. Of course I'd seen the boy on several occasions, he would come along with his satchel under his arm, and would fetch them home and push the pram for her. He had even spoken to me. But it never entered my head . . . And then one day our two prams were side by side and the babies were laughing, and the lad was sitting beside his friend, and who should appear to fetch me but my husband.— 'Hullo,' said he, 'Taluyers, how are you?' I saw the boy flush, for my husband is pretty sharp with his pupils. But he just adores his baby and it made him feel indulgent to be sitting there beside her as she lay in her pram. So he said pleasantly to the boy, pointing to the other laughing baby, 'Is that your little sister?' 'No,' replied Taluyers, 'it's my daughter. . . .' I can't tell you how amazed we were, my husband and I, and rather indignant at first, of course . . . but after a bit, well, the child was such a darling and so like our own. . . . My husband would often say: 'Can you beat it . . . Taluyers! . . .' And I used to feel that he was touched. . . . At the baccalauréat my husband was examiner, and Taluyers was one of his candidates.

The wretched boy was in an awful state, he stuttered and it appears he made appalling slips. My husband kept on saying : ' Come now, Taluyers ! I'm certain you know the answer to that question. You know it in class. What's the matter with you ? ' And Taluyers kept answering : ' Yes, Monsieur . . . yes . . . but you . . . you see . . . ! ' and he ended by whispering, because of the other examiners : ' my baby's got whooping cough, Monsieur. . . .' And so my husband gave him 20 marks."

And Taluyers was only a little fellow, who had been kept in knickerbockers till three years ago, and whose voice hadn't really quite broken.

And no doubt the whole of it was very pathetic, but for a mother like Madame Casseneuil it didn't seem to be anything but alarming. What an example ! The worst of perils ! The little shop-girl, the ménage, the illegitimate child ! . . . It was all too terrible. Good Heavens ! The very thought that Dominique might lose his head over some working girl and make a fool of himself ! . . . A ruined life ! And when it came to the point she was less afraid of the ruffianly Chapareillan for her son, than of sentimental little Taluyers.

For that matter Dominique wasn't like either of them. Ah ! Dominique wasn't like anyone else in the world ! . . .

Yes, she had told herself that with joy and pride ! She had rejoiced to see him gentle, orderly, even vain. To know that he never wrote silly little love poems such as many a young man scribbles in his note-books. She had rejoiced that he never looked brazenly at women. . . .

Yes, she had rejoiced over that . . . poor fool !

XI

And always one thing before her eyes :

The bedroom at Avignon. The smell : a smell of scent mixed with carbolic acid. On the wall the photograph of the naked statue : "Apollo, from the antique" . . . The kimono—the kimono that her lips had kissed : she had not known, how could she possibly have known ! . . . The letters : "My very dear one, will you come to-morrow ? . . . I do so utterly need to see you. . . ." And then, in the recess, the bed. . . .

He is dead. They have laid him upon that bed. And as "it was the head that was injured," they have spread a great white sheet all over him. They did well.

Always that sight before her eyes : the recess, the bed, and the billowing white sheet . . . and under the sheet, what was under the sheet ? A corpse ? . . . No, under the sheet the fulfilment of an ignoble lust. . . .

XII

"Well, Mathilde, and what about your son? Is he still . . . you know? . . . yes? . . ." Madame Flachères would enquire. And Jean, as time went on, had become less careful in relating his travels, had ceased to hesitate before a crude word or a risky anecdote. She would check him at such moments with an embarrassed reproof: "Really, Jean . . ." and a glance in the boy's direction. But Jean would blow away her scruples in a cloud of cigar smoke. They had never actually discussed the matter, the father and the mother—she had always felt an instinctive repugnance—but, good Lord! Dominique was eighteen. . . .

And Madame Casseneuil herself would sometimes suspect that her son was no longer pure. Sometimes. But since, after all, no word had been said, since there was no real proof, she clung to the hope that he might have remained so. It was all nebulous, indeterminate, rather cowardly. He seldom went out in the evenings and always came back early; he had never spent a night away

from home, and rarely even stayed out to luncheon. He spent very little money. There were none of those pretexts, daily less ingenious, with which young men attempt emancipation, none of those transparent falsehoods that are born rather of polite modesty than of dissimulation. In most cases parents arrive by imperceptible stages at the realisation that their son has reached his manhood ; one day he has failed to turn up for the family " outing " ; soon afterwards he is given a latchkey. . . . When did he have his first mistress ? Nobody knows, but they do know that she is an accomplished fact. An understanding gradually develops, undiscussed, on a vaguely hypocritical basis.

Madame Casseneuil had sometimes believed that Dominique might have a mistress. But he never spoke of such a thing ; his life remained unaltered ; he loved his mother as much as ever and was constantly at her side. Therefore why imagine things ? One naturally hates the woman who robs one of a son, but casual mistresses can scarcely be regarded as calamities.

And then, when her mind dwelt upon her son's hypothetical mistresses, it was not very lucid. A mother's imagination is very innocent. Everything that appertains to her

child assumes a savour of innocence. She doesn't visualise endearments. The adventures with which she consents to endow her son retain an idyllic fragrance. He triumphs over virtue—that merely means that he is irresistible, that anyone must fall into his arms—beyond that she sees nothing ; her thoughts, like those of a virginal girl, never go beyond the kiss upon the lips. Love is merely an emotion.

The bedroom at Avignon, the kimono, Apollo, the letters, the bed . . .

Love is a physical act. . . .

XIII

A physical act of which the foulness pursues her.

She herself . . .

She was a woman before she became a mother. A woman whose body was possessed, aroused, caressed. . . . A decent woman, but one who had known desire. Love : a physical act.

She had been naked, docile, inquisitive.

On certain evenings she had gone to her bedroom, a placid woman, a serious housewife with a shade of severity in her eyes, who paused upon the threshold to give a final order to the maid on her way up to bed. She undresses ; she folds her clothes carefully in her accustomed fashion ; she continues with her husband the conversation begun at dinner. The room looks just the same as it did when she came into it during the daytime, when the maid, when her son were in it. She remarks, as she gets into bed : " I'm afraid Dominique has got a cold. . . ." or else : " I must remember to order the coals to-morrow morning. . . ." The light is

switched off, or is left burning—and all in a moment they are merely male and female and there are acts. . . .

Next morning the room is once more a respectable bedroom, a bedroom that is swept by the maid, where the furniture is polished and the clock strikes the busy hours, one of the rooms in the flat. . . .

And now these memories haunt her ! . . .

In moments of desire, Jean's voice would become suddenly hoarse, and there would be minute red filaments in the whites of his eyes. . . .

. . . Sometimes, when she was standing with raised arms before her dressing-room mirror with nothing on but her chemise, brushing her hair for the night, two strong hands would suddenly seize her by the waist. . . .

Hands that have caressed her entire body. . . .

. . . When she had been fourteen or fifteen years of age she had attended a school for young girls : she had been very innocent ; a schoolfellow had said to her : " Bournès has promised to lend me a book "—Bournès was another schoolfellow—" such a book ! you know ! . . . I'll hand it on to you, if you like, only if they smell it out, you mustn't

say that I lent it to you. . . ." She had read the book. A base little volume. She had read it through to the end, without enjoyment, but with a sort of pleasurable uneasiness. . . . She had not understood much of it, for that matter, and yet entire sentences had remained in her memory so that she could have repeated them word for word ; she was repeating them mentally now. . . .

When Jean had desired her he used to say : " Listen . . . Kiki . . . "

They had married because they were in love with each other. There had been the first night . . . and then, some nights later, she had received the revelation of pleasure. . . . She had been twenty years old at that time, a tall, handsome girl, as sound as a bell.

On those first occasions when Jean had to leave her for his reporting, she would add a postscript to the letters she wrote him : " I do want you to come home, *Kiki*. . . ." She would underline the Kiki, and they both knew what that meant. . . .

They had had an amazing honeymoon. The corpse of a prostitute at Mont-de-Marsan had been discovered, horribly mutilated, in the outbuildings of a château ;

there being no evidence they were accusing everyone : the owner of the château, the farmer, the grape pickers, tramps . . . *The Mystery of the Landes !* The affair had caused a public sensation. The newspapers were full of it, and Jean's paper had asked him to investigate it. That was on a Saturday and they had been married on the Thursday. . . . They had set out on the Sunday. They had stayed at a wretched inn where they had had a dark room with a worm-eaten bed. Jean was on the run all day, questioning and pumping. She would wait for him on one of those interminable Landes roads. Roads that were stiff and straight and that seemed to have no ending, with pines to the right and left and pines before and behind you. She would sit on a milestone and look at the wounded pines with their little cups hung on their stomachs like beggars, poor generous trees that appeared to ask for alms. Jean would return at last to narrate the latest details regarding the murder. It was melancholy enough in all conscience. As soon as she was alone with her husband she would fling herself into his arms. And so they had loved one another every single night of those two weeks. So much so that finally the worm-eaten bed had given way. . . . And

ever afterwards, when Jean wanted to be funny, he would proclaim : " The Mystery of the Landes ! . . ." And she would blush and smile.

. . . One night—not long after Dominique's birth—Jean had said : " Listen . . . Kiki . . ." and had taken her in his arms. But she had drawn back, scandalised : the child's crib was at the foot of the bed. " Oh ! Jean, no, how can you ! . . ." But he had protested : " How can I ? . . . Oh, come now ! . . . I'm thirty-two today and it's the 22nd of April, and we'll put him in the next room ! . . ." She had yielded in the end, in a wave of happy temptation, and they had got up quietly in their night-clothes and had carried the crib into the dressing-room with a thousand precautions to avoid waking the child. . . .

Her own voice, a veiled voice in which she said : " I love you . . ."

. . . And the murmurs that would escape her in moments of passion . . .

. . . And then had come Jean's success and his long journeys to the ends of the earth. When he came back he took possession of her as a matter of course. At the other end of the flat the child, who was growing up, had his own room. And to her, a grass widow

immersed in her quiet habits, would come a reawakening and nights that were so different from those to which she had grown accustomed. She would yield without protest, and be surprised and half embarrassed to discover that what had seemed a duty suddenly became a delight. . . . Conjugal enjoyments with a husband who had been so long away that his embraces had the savour of a guilty adventure. As she gave herself she would think of her son, asleep at the other end of the flat. A devoted mother, a woman of nearly forty years old, suddenly naked, obedient and responsive in the arms of a man . . .

Jean would say: "Exactly! A man should always treat his wife as though she were his mistress. . . ."

Jean would stay away for such a long time! There would come days when in the middle of some sensible occupation, when she was reading or sewing, her thoughts would conjure him up . . . not exactly him, perhaps, but love, and would evoke some particular caress. . . . Only for a moment, and then it would be over.

. . . One afternoon, in the study . . .

. . . And the languid, satiate atmosphere of loving . . .

All that had been hidden away in the depths of her memory ! And now it comes surging upwards and submerges all the rest. She no longer sees or knows her surroundings.

Within her and around her she sees only one thing. One thing only. The act——

XIV

Jean is there.

"Mathilde . . ."

He sits down. She remains standing.

"My poor Mathilde . . ."

He tries to meet her eyes. She moves an ornament, straightens a chair, arranges the folds of a curtain : her eyes do not meet his.

"My poor girl . . ."

He has just arrived. He still wears his travelling suit, a grey-green tweed with a check pattern—the very suit that haunted M. Coquineau's dreams, that excellent frock-coated M. Coquineau—naturally Jean wears his travelling suit : he jumped on the train the moment he received his wife's telegram. And so he only wears a black tie and a crêpe band on his arm. It suggests the mourning of a distant relation . . . well . . . what else is he ?

"My poor girl . . . my poor, poor girl . . ."

He is terribly unhappy, with a simple, honest sorrow. Fortunate man !

He is also rather ridiculous. He had been taking the opportunity of his journey to a

distant country in order to grow a beard, and he has returned in the middle of the process. As yet it is neither straight nor curly, it is too long or too short, a stubble. He has long dreamed of a pointed beard that would suit his blue eyes and his aquiline nose ; he has never yet achieved one. Ten times he has made the attempt, but one looks such a freak with a half-grown beard. There are several terrible weeks, weeks of the beard's growing pains, when one merely looks dirty and longs to say : " You know, I'm not taking up savings on the barber. . . ." It is a process that should be undergone in the country. One goes away clean-shaven and returns with a neat beard ! . . . But when one is travelling and by train ! . . . One's fellow travellers may be excused for verifying the safety of their pocket-books. The managers of hotels regard one with suspicion and one no longer dares to glance at a pretty woman. And Jean happens to be always travelling. And so, time and again, after a few days' trial, he would make a face at himself in the glass, exclaim : " Oh, damn it all, I look too disgusting . . ." and set to work with a razor upon the sprouting offence. But this time he has persevered. He already displays the results of

two months' growth. The worst is over. He had not expected to return so soon. . . .

And so he is unhappy, with a two months' beard. . . . And it makes his grief appear less deep and less sincere. God alone knows why it should do so. He looks like a stage coal-heaver. And Françoise—who was really attached to Monsieur Dominique—has nevertheless found it difficult not to giggle as she waited on them at luncheon, each time she has seen Monsieur Casseneuil's sad eyes above that stubbly chin. Madame Casseneuil is a little shocked ; she feels inclined to say : " Take it off, do ! This isn't the moment. . . ." just as though he were doing it to be funny. And he himself has a vague feeling that perhaps he ought to shave it ; but after all, he has wanted a beard for such a long time, and just as the worst is over ! . . . He lets it be.

All the same he is very unhappy, very unhappy indeed . . . he sits there miserably in his arm-chair. He only says a very few words, and even then his face twitches and his mouth trembles. Perhaps a tear is falling into that two months' beard.

" Mathilde . . ."

Is he weeping ? Happy man ! happy man !

" Why did you only send me a wire ?

. . . I think you might have written me a letter. . . ."

A letter? . . . She did write one. She had begun to write it.

She had written it beneath the framed photograph—so white against its black background—of the nude "Apollo, after the antique." The bells of Avignon had clanged; two women had gossiped under the open window; and half unconsciously her left hand had been holding a yellow silk kimono.

Hot weather; her moist hands had greased the paper and the ink of the words she wrote had run. She had had to give up trying to write. She had wanted to finish emptying the drawers. And then she had discovered those letters, those letters. . . .

She had torn up her own epistle, with the same abrupt gesture that had drawn the curtain across the open window. Hastily. So that no one might see! So that no one might suspect! Those letters exhaled their horrible secret like an intolerable incense: its fumes had overwhelmed her. They must not steal out of the open window to the two gossiping women below! . . . Surely they must already have infected her unfinished letter to Jean: she had destroyed the letter. . . .

How could she dare to send it as it was, breathing only a confiding anguish? And how should she now attempt to continue it? . . . He will know the truth. He will have to know it, the unhappy father. She had written: "You are far away. I am writing so that you can be with me. We must be here together, side by side, in the bedroom of our son, who is dead. . . ." Side by side. Then of course he will have to know. Yes, yes. . . . But not just yet, not so cruelly! . . . And how should she have found the courage to write it? Could such things be written? And Jean had been so very far away.

"Mathilde . . ."

But now he is here.

She had destroyed the letter. . . . She had remained alone with her secret. The minutes had passed, or had they been hours? At first she had still heard the murmur of the women's voices, stifled by the drawn curtain; she had not noticed when it ceased. Church bells had rung. She had remained motionless beside the fireplace in the corner to which she had instinctively retreated, as far as possible from the open drawers—motionless, but the marble chimney-piece had burnt her elbow, and her

knees had trembled under her. Opposite her, over there, at the other end of the room on the wall, the naked body of Apollo stood out white against black—obscene. Scattered papers and an ignoble incense that rose momentarily more stifling. . . . Alone with her secret.

And all at once, in the midst of that frozen fever, in her sudden and bottomless despair, she had thought that she might for ever keep her own counsel. No one should ever know or suspect. No one. Dominique's memory should be soiled only in his mother's heart.

Could the truth weigh more heavily in any other heart? . . .

"Mathilde . . ."

Yes, Jean is here. His father. The infinite relief of a burden shared.

"You should have written to me, Mathilde."

Of course she should have written. He was his son as well as hers. A husband and wife should share everything, even the vileness of their child. They should be able to comfort one another, just as they would do were they only mourning his death. It would help her. Yes, now she can tell. She ought to tell. She is going to tell him.

She notices a chair out of place, an

ornament has been shifted, a curtain caught up untidily.

Not just yet. Poor man ! Let him weep a little longer for nothing worse than the death of his child.

" My poor Mathilde . . . I know how much you loved him. . . . Do you remember when I used to tell you that you loved him too much ? " . . .

Yes. Too much, far too much ! . . . The horrible child. . . .

" I used to tell you. . . . But you mustn't stand any longer, sit down."

No. She will remain standing. Slightly behind him. Ready to turn away. Since she is going to tell him. . . . One cannot commit murder sitting comfortably face to face with the victim.

" Mathilde . . . you are most terribly unhappy ? "

" Yes."

It's a lie. What she feels is something quite different.

" You've no one left now but your old Jean, my poor darling."

No one but him, true enough, no one but him.

" But your old Jean loves you dearly, you know that."

She knows it. His face with its two months' beard has an infinitely tender smile. Well, she has got to tell him. . . . But first she answers :

" Yes, my dearest."

It is a word that she is not in the habit of using, that she has not uttered for a long time past. But she needed a term of affection and a gentle voice. Because she is going to tell him. . . . Jean notices it.

" Your dearest . . . Ah, my poor Mathilde, so now you call me your dearest again . . . as you used to do when we were first married. . . . Later on it was Dominique who became your ' dearest ' ! " . . .

Yes. . . . She had taken to calling Jean "father." She had gradually and intentionally shed all her lover-like cajolings, the foolish little tender names, the kisses at parting and the caress at meeting again : she had ceased leaning her head against his shoulder, stroking his cheek, twining her fingers in his for a moment . . . and she had missed all those endearments. But Dominique had been growing up. She had not wished him to see the tokens of even a legitimate passion.

The absurdity of it ! . . .

" I'm very unhappy too, you know,

Mathilde . . . But I hardly dare to say so. Because I feel that my sorrow in comparison with yours . . . I was truly and deeply devoted to the poor child, but I was always so far away from you both. . . . The more memories one has, the more cruelly one suffers. . . . You were so constantly with him. . . . I never watched him growing up . . . and so . . . you can understand . . ."

She does understand. He saw, at intervals, a baby, a little child, a boy, a young man. They were all called Dominique, but they might have been ten different children. One of the ten has died. His grief is the less severe. She can venture to make her terrible confession ; to him it will be less terrible. Now, she will speak.

Her hands are no longer restless. They no longer touch an ornament, a chair, a curtain; they are quietly folded. . . .

"Jean, your son . . ."

No. Not even yet.

" My son. And I never watched him grow up. I would come home and say : ' Good Lord ! How he's grown ! ' It wasn't the same at all. I would go away with an image of him in my mind, and I would keep that image unaltered for three months, six

months. Then I would come back and find him quite different. . . . I was always having shocks. . . ."

Always having shocks. And in a few moments . . .

She does not move a muscle. She stands erect by the corner of the table looking as though suddenly bereft of all mentality. She is waiting for courage.

Jean stares into space. His mouth and his stubbly chin are trembling again. He is thinking of the child that is no more. . . .

"Mathilde, I should like to see his photographs. . . ."

"His photographs?"

"Yes. Where's the album?"

It had always lain on the table. It is no longer there. An album with gaping pages that will not remain closed. . . . It is in a locked drawer, at the bottom of that drawer.

"There you are, my dearest."

What will he see in the pictures? How often she has looked at them and never seen a sign. . . .

"There he is on the beach with his little friend. . . . How old was he then? Six? Or seven?"

" Six."

" He *was* a darling. . . . "

" Yes."

" Wasn't that at Trestignel ? "

" At Trestraou."

" Sit down beside me, Mathilde. Let's look at them together."

He makes room for her beside him. A father and a mother who are going to grieve together over their lost child. Oh, no . . . not that. . . .

" No. I know them so well."

She has looked at them too often in the past with innocent enjoyment ! She could not see them now, those lying pictures. A gentle face, fair hair, long lashes, a shy smile, and his head inclined towards his shoulder—hypocrite ! Hypocrite !

" He was very like you, Mathilde ! . . ."

" Oh, no ! No ! " . . .

Her entire being denies it.

" Oh, yes. He was indeed."

And it is true. He had been like her.

" As he grew up the likeness became more striking. Look at this one here, it's the very image of you."

The shame of it ! . . . And she had been so proud, so idiotically proud of the resemblance.

" This one was taken at Avignon, wasn't it ? "

" Yes."

Yes, indeed. The last of the snapshots. At the wheel of his car, wearing a soft felt hat. At Avignon . . .

Jean lingers over that one. That is the son who has died. He smiles, a sad smile, but a smile none the less. Be tender to him, unhappy father. Look well at your son. Behold him as he was ! Oh, you will know soon enough what he really was ! . . . Listen. . .

Not yet. Time enough to efface that smile. . . .

How soon, then ? When the smile has faded she will speak. He sits there smiling at the photograph, smiling. . . . Poor man, happy man who can still endure to see it ! When he raises his eyes . . .

She had wished to remain standing but she sits down. She sits down opposite him with the table between them and stares at him fixedly with genuine compassion : she is going to speak.

Jean, her husband. She suddenly feels that she loves him. She examines his face with leisurely minuteness. His face is honest and energetic and full of kindness. Touching, in

spite of its two months' beard. He has clear eyes, three deep lines on his forehead and a mouth that is again trembling at the corners : men are always so unwilling to cry ! . . . He says : " Our child . . . our poor child ! " Nothing more. But somehow it is infinitely moving. " Our child . . . " Long ago he had said : " It would be rather fun to have a child of our very own, Mathilde, wouldn't it ? . . ." At that time they hadn't really made up their minds to have one. After all, they were only just married, and there wasn't a lot of money. . . . A child costs something ! And then, they were in love, and two's company. A child can intrude almost as much as a lover. And so, quite often, they used to look at one another and say : " No, no, much better not . . ." But at other times they couldn't help weakening and would exchange guilty, sentimental glances : " All the same, it would be rather jolly, a kid of our very own. . . . A little Dominique . . . or a little Colette. . . . " And they would tease each other : " I believe you'd rather it would be a little Colette ! . . . Wouldn't you ? . . . Men always like a girl best." For her part she had already thoughts of a little Dominique. She could visualise him when Jean, rather

sly and tender, would insist : " What about a little Dominique, Mathilde ? Haven't you any use for him ? . . ."

Of course she had. He should wear those funny long trousers that come right up to the armpits, and tiny braces. . . . Somehow those long trousers had weighed quite a lot in the balance. . . . She had been so young ! And then clothes always play a large part in feminine decisions.

And then he had arrived, the little Dominique. He had made the decision for them. It was odd, but she who was to become so profoundly, so classically maternal, had begun by feeling completely indifferent. She had experienced none of that flood of tenderness, none of that urgent anxiety which is supposed to overwhelm young mothers. She had felt nothing at all but physical relief. She had heard a shrill cry coming from the cradle. There had been no immediate response in her heart. She had merely said to herself : " At last, it's over." Why, good Lord, it had been only just beginning ; but she had thought that it was over. She had revelled in that physical relief—they call it a deliverance, don't they ?—exhausted, indifferent, she had been astonished to see the emotion and delight in

Jean's face as he had bent over her. Why so much delight? He had said: "It's a little Dominique, Mathilde. . . ." How happy he had been! . . .

How happy he had been! . . . Across the table, Madame Casseneuil, in anguished concentration, leans closer to her husband. He is still staring at the photograph that he holds in his shaking hands. In his face she seems to see once more the radiance of that morning, eighteen years ago. . . . How happy he had been! . . . How can she possibly tell him? . . .

Jean is speaking to her. She leans closer:

"That child . . . that child . . . our child, Mathilde . . ."

Their child . . . yes. And there is a note of pride in his voice when he says it. They had both been proud of their son. They had been careful not to dispose of his future, they had waited until he should develop a bent so that they might respect his inclinations, but they had both dreamed of a brilliant career. It had been natural enough. Especially for Jean. Fathers do take a pride in their sons. They look on them in some sort as a personal projection. They endow them with all that they have missed in life. Jean had rejoiced in Dominique's passion for

motors because he himself had been a duffer at mechanics. . . .

Their child . . . They had believed—God help them—that he was destined to be the best of themselves, a compound of all their better qualities, made out of the purest of both their hearts. . . . And now they must admit: "You, a decent man, and I, a decent woman, we have only produced a perverted child. . . . The flesh of our flesh, the soul of our souls, the best of you and of me was nothing but a degenerate. . . ."

What a confession! She must blush to make it and he must blush to hear her. Must it indeed be made?

Jean is going to speak again. Closer still she leans . . . closer. . . .

"You see, Mathilde, the fact is . . . I've only just realised the dreadful truth . . . I never knew our child!"

Never knew him! In spite of herself, she moans:

"I never knew him either!"

But he does not understand her.

"I didn't really know him. I was with him so seldom, I hardly ever talked to him. . . . Sometimes he would say something that surprised me. I would say to myself:

'So that's what he thinks?' . . . It wasn't exactly unexpected, but not quite what I expected either. When one isn't always living with one's children, when one isn't in daily contact with their mental growth, one is so ignorant of them. You know how it is, the chatter at meals. . . . They come home from school, they pour out their small daily excitements . . . their prowess at games, the gossip of the class-rooms, their anxieties over their studies, their school-friends, their teachers . . . the hundred and one things they say that give you a clue to what they keep to themselves . . . for they always keep back something. . . . But when one knows their impulses one can gauge their inner life. . . . But I, I never knew him, and now I realise it. You used to write to me: 'He has influenza . . . he's top of his class in mathematics. . . .' At one time I'd be anxious, at another I'd be pleased, but you can understand that I was never really in touch. . . . I couldn't say to myself: 'He's happy, and so he's thinking such and such a thing—or doing this or that . . .' not as one feels it about someone with whom one is really intimate. . . . I assure you, I'm not exaggerating. . . . For instance, in Pekin or Venice, when I had to choose a

present for him, some trifle, I would say to myself: 'Now let me see, what kind of thing would he like?' . . . I didn't know beforehand. I would hesitate, just because I didn't know. I would buy something suitable for a boy of his age. Just as one buys for the child of a friend. . . . And of course I never realised it till now. . . ."

Yes, he is right, more than right. He was not intimate enough, not anxious enough, not enough there. He had never been the true comrade.

And so . . . If she speaks, how will he judge the son whom he has never known? He has said it: like the child of a friend! He will have almost the severity, the contempt of an outsider. He will never have the compassion, the true understanding and indulgence. . . . Yes, indulgence! A necessary and just indulgence. Just. To be truly just one must realise that however culpable the child may have been, he was nevertheless, perhaps, a victim. He was weak.

Jean is shaking his head over his thoughts. He resumes:

"Yes, I had a son and I never knew him . . . Mathilde!"

Is he calling her?

"Mathilde . . . you shall tell me all about him. . . ."

She gazes out of the window: a foolish fly buzzes stubbornly against the panes.

"Yes, my dearest, I will tell you all about him."

So be it: he shall never know the truth, never.

XV

"Listen . . . Kiki . . ."

It is night. A small lamp illumines the conjugal bed.

"Listen . . . Kiki . . ."

The language of desire. But she well knows how much compassion tempers that desire : he believes that love may, for an instant, lessen her anguish.

And after all, why not ? To lie in his arms. To receive his passion, overwhelming all reflection. Only to think of themselves, as though they two had always been alone together.

"Oh ! Jean . . . do talk to me of yourself . . . of nothing but yourself . . . of long, long ago, when we were engaged. . . . Remind me of our early days together. You know, when we first made a home. . . . Our little flat in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier. . . . Who were our neighbours there . . . can't you remember ? I seem to have forgotten it all. . . ."

She has forgotten : Dominique, Dominique, Dominique . . . so many memories of

Dominique have come to bury the others !

" Jean, talk to me of ourselves. We married because we loved one another. After all, Jean, that love of ours was something worth remembering. . . . Why can't you tell me about ourselves ! "

He does not understand : he speaks to her of Dominique. He has long grown accustomed to feeling that, so far as she is concerned, the best element of their love is Dominique.

" No. Ourselves, I tell you ! Ourselves . . . "

She clings more closely to him ; as to a raft of salvation. Her arms tighten around him. Then :

" Kiki . . . "

He implores her . . . and she yields. With a desperate hope. Yes, yes, she desires his love. He bends over her . . .

But suddenly she repulses him with all her strength, she thrusts him from her with a cry of horror. That flushed face, marred by passion, coming nearer.

" Oh ! No ! . . . No ! "

In the features of the father she has visualised her son. She has beheld her son, transfigured by lust, her son as a lover, bending over her. . . .

XVI

Jean has gone.

He has left her after a few melancholy and futile weeks. He could feel that she was withering under an overwhelming grief—a son so beloved who had been taken from her—had tried his utmost to heal the wound, never leaving her side and begging her to come out with him. And she always consented. She really believed that she kept him company, never realising the chasm created between them by her ever-present obsession. In the streets she walked with him arm in arm, but she was like a reluctant young man commandeered by his family, who walks beside them with his thoughts far away.

Neither of them ever mentioned Dominique any more. If only it sufficed to leave a name unspoken, how simple life would be. . . .

They had gone for walks like married people who are bored with one another, but who talk of various things for the sake of talking. Like so many married people.

They had looked into shop windows like indifferent idlers, and since, being Parisians, they could hardly look at the Paris monuments, they had looked at those temporary monuments, the hoardings. She had gone with him on his visits to the newspaper offices—just as she had used to do formerly with Dominique, whenever his father had joined them in the Rue Le Verrier—but she had refused to accompany him into the private rooms of the Director and the Editor ; she had preferred to remain in the waiting-room, seated stiffly on one of those dachshund-shaped benches ; she uttered no word and she never moved. On several occasions office boys had asked her her business, mistaking her for some down-and-out in need of assistance. They were not far wrong as to her need, but she must look elsewhere for help. Sometimes as they walked together Jean would press her arm affectionately, as though he tried to say : " I know how miserable you are, my poor darling, but I'm here, close to you, and I love you and understand " ; and she in her turn would press his arm, and the pressure would signify " No, you don't understand at all, but it doesn't matter because you're so kind." That was for a moment. And then

it all began over again. And a few minutes later, more pressing of arms. They did their best about it, the poor, unhappy souls.

At home together matters were even worse. There they were not side by side, but sitting face to face ; they could see one another. And in her guarded eyes was so profound a tenderness that Jean would feel embarrassed. She would blush without cause, and as suddenly feel faint, or shiver with fever. She would make such obvious efforts to eat or to converse ! And so it would be a relief to them both when Françoise would bring in the evening post. Jean would unfold the newspaper between them, in an impulse that held as much pity as selfishness : he was hidden from her, but she was hidden from him.

He would bring her presents, trying to remember trifles that she had once wished to possess ; something might yet give her a moment's gratification. But both of them knew there was nothing to be done.

They dined one evening at a big restaurant. They had happened to run up against Monsieur Ravignhouse, a very nice man whom Jean had known for years and whom he had hobnobbed with at various European hotels.

" Madame," M. Ravignhouse had said

when giving his invitation, " I'm not really being altruistic at all, I'm asking you to do me a genuine service. Your husband has perhaps explained my profession? I'm a traveller on behalf of ' Guides Limited.' It's thanks to me that you can read in their pamphlets : ' Annecy is reached by train, tram or by lake steamboat. Customs. Omnibus. Hotels : G. H. d'Angleterre, rue Royale ; recomm :—Hotel du Mont Blanc, rue de Vangelas, good (60 rooms, pension from . . .).' I myself have made either on foot, by mule, carriage, or motor, every excursion of which that little village boasts : ' One hour's walk by the woodland path to the Massue d'Hercule, superb view, remuneration to guide . . . ' And what is worse, in order to decide conscientiously whether the Hotel du Cheval Blanc shall be classified as ' recomm : ', ' good,' or ' fair,' I have had to sit down to a meal in every single " Cheval Blanc," in every single " Regina " and in every single Miramar ! You will hardly be astonished, Madame, if twenty years of such meals have entirely ruined my digestion. And yet one must live. I have a profession and must practise it. And also I have the scruples of an earlier generation. I can no longer be a personal judge of cooking : must

I therefore distribute at hazard my 'recomms' and my 'fairs' among the Miramars, the Reginas and the Cheval Blancs? I dare not. It would be too dishonest. Must I on the other hand—since I require money if I am to eat at all—eat until I destroy my health? Obviously not. And so I invite a healthy digestion to be my guest at each hotel or inn. I observe its reactions to what it consumes, and am thus honestly absolved from the need of retiring. I am at the present moment compiling a guide to Paris for a Czech publisher. I have still a sound eye for monuments, but no stomach left for a restaurant. During the past month I have nightly borrowed somebody else's. I know that Jean Casse is a discriminating trencherman. Will you both oblige me by dining with me to-morrow evening at the Tour de Nesles?"

Madame Casseneuil had smiled and had not at once refused. And Jean had exclaimed:

"But why not? Don't you think it might amuse you?" After all, good God! why not, indeed? Her thoughts would be the same there as anywhere else! . . .

They had sat near a window. Between the badly drawn curtains one caught a glimpse of the night and of an electric standard that looked like a luminous egg. In the restaurant

itself, men with whores ; men also with their wives who had much the same appearance. On the tables glasses of champagne blossomed like over-blown flowers.

"Jolly smart place," Ravignhouse was saying. "The real thing—waiter, bring me two boiled eggs, some plain boiled macaroni, diet bread and a half-bottle of Vichy. You'll oblige me, Casse, by sampling the lobster thermidor. It's the speciality of the house and I'd like to put it to the test. And I want you to listen to what the other clients are saying. Your husband, madame, is an amazing reporter, he is capable of eavesdropping ten simultaneous conversations—he has the ear of an orchestral conductor."

Towards the end of dinner, at the moment when chairs are pushed back from the table, Jean and the gastronomic expert had begun to size up their neighbours. They had recognised a good few, having met them at Cairo, at Monte Carlo or in London, and they had started to discuss them, which meant discussing their vices. The only really remarkable things about them. They had one apiece ; some of them had several.

And Madame Casseneuil had raised her head, had begun to observe these people while listening to her host.

They were pitiable creatures, these poor rich people. The women looked flabby in their skimpy gowns. The men sat hunched in their chairs, with cigarettes dribbling from loose and disillusioned lips. And yet, among them was a great musician, an important senator, an English nobleman, and the prettiest actress in Paris. Poor Paris, how they do miscall you !

" Ah ! "

Madame Casseneuil's attention is violently arrested. She pretends to laugh, and her laugh leads to enquiry. One by one Jean and Ravignhouse enumerate the vices.

" That man there ? "

" Women."

" And that man ? "

" Men."

" And this one ? "

" Children."

" The one in the corner ? "

" The bastinado."

" His neighbour ? "

" Prefers the knout and her neighbour the needle."

Apparently there are more which they do not care to define.

All of them, then ? And the musician has

composed immortal masterpieces ; the senator is renowned for his eloquence and profound knowledge. The actress . . . no, the actress is quite devoid of talent. But all the same, the most eminent, those who are most admired. All of them. Look where one may, one sees only defilement, the universal delirium of wretched human bodies. . . .

Opposite her sits Jean her husband. Jean, slightly uplifted by good food and choice wines—for of course Ravignhouse must learn something of the restaurant's cellars—Jean is looking with rather a peculiar smile at the prettiest actress in Paris, who is shamelessly stroking and kissing the arm of the woman who sits beside her.

Jean ! Even Jean, what secret man may well be concealed beneath the man she knows ? Who can tell what foul desires fester in his imagination ? She has never seen in him anything but a decent man, healthy, clean-minded, the man she had chosen, the man on whom she had always depended. An honest man, a loving husband, a tender father. Twenty years she has lived and believed these things. Has she been blind for over twenty years ?

The orchestra strikes up. Multi-coloured balls are thrown from table to table. There is

dancing, of course, general and indiscriminate : polygamy in clothing.

" Let's go——" she says suddenly.

She felt physically sick ! Out in the street Jean had leant towards her, attentive, anxious. " Of course . . . perhaps we shouldn't have accepted. . . . Take my arm, Mathilde."

But she had refused to take his arm.

All of them. Even her husband, perhaps. Surely among these multiple perversions lay some excuse for Dominique's weakness !

No ! All these people are just people to her ; her husband himself is only a man—while Dominique — Dominique was her child !

XVII

The letters, the ignoble letters are at the bottom of her cupboard in a little locked casket together with her marriage lines, her cheque-book, some lottery tickets, and the love letters that Jean had written her when they were engaged. She had kept Jean's letters and these others lie beside them, in the same casket, the only one she possesses.

She has neither torn up nor burnt those ignoble letters. Why? She does not know. It never occurred to her to tear them up or to burn them. She had brought them home with her. In the train she had carried them on her person, between her stays and her undergarments. And throughout the journey she had been haunted by one thought: "God send there mayn't be a railway accident!" She had seen herself injured or dead, and her terror had been, not that she might die—God! no, but that they might pick her up and undress her and find those terrible letters upon her! . . . The horror of it!

Immediately on reaching home she had thrown them into the casket; at once, before

even taking off her hat; before she had thought of unbuttoning her gloves. And since that day she has never touched them. But she knows each one, she could recite passages from them by heart.

That night at Avignon, after the awful shock of discovery, long afterwards, she had drawn slowly near to the scattered papers and had read them through, one by one, to the end. She had hoped. Yes, she had still nourished a crazy hope that she would find a word, a sentence that would prove her wrong. That would prove beyond doubt that she had been mistaken, that the letters betokened an innocent affection, that either they were not addressed to Dominique, or else that they had not been written by a man. And she had read on—read the words of love, the memories, the grateful, playful words, the promises of passionate largesse. . . .

Graven in her soul: the words, the dates. One had been written in March. In the middle of April Dominique had spent a week with her in Paris! . . .

A festive week. He had never before left her side, and during that week she had known an unprecedented delight: that of meeting him again after separation. He had only been away for so short a while—so short

a while ! It had seemed long to a mother !—She had gazed at him as though he had come from the ends of the earth. She had never taken her eyes from him, absurdly, childishly happy. She had found him grown and looking extremely well ; had seized hold of his arm and felt his biceps, as one might do to a schoolboy home for the Easter holidays. She had talked to him of Avignon, as though it were a school, a tiresome school to which he must return once the holidays should be over. Getting him back once more after having lost him had made him seem to her more than ever a child. She had hugged him closely.

And even then he had been that man's victim.

They had not gone about much together during that week. Dominique would laugh and say : " I'm nothing but a country cousin ! I must rediscover Paris ! " There were friends whom he wanted to see ; a Rugby match he was keen to attend ; a new motor to test ; errands for a friend at Avignon . . . a friend at Avignon !—a happy week none the less. Think of it : the joy of expecting him home to dinner, of laying the table—the joy of seeing two places laid once more ! Of concocting the menu, of saying

to Françoise : " Monsieur Dominique doesn't care for that. . . . We must ask Monsieur Dominique whether he would like . . ." Of hearing Françoise grumble more volubly because Monsieur Dominique is there : " Automatic sweeper ! . . . automatic indeed ! . . . Lord, there goes my hot water ! . . ." Of finding his clothes tossed all over the room, his bed unmade, of hearing his hasty step noisily climbing the stairs—the steps of a telegraph boy—and the wonderful sound of his key in the front door—she had made him take his key with him, even to Avignon, it had seemed to lessen the pang of his going. . . . In short, the joy of having him with her, of looking at him, questioning him without respite. The joy of being anxious whenever he was late, the joy of finding fault with him : " Dominique, you really must take life more seriously."

A festive week. And even then, he had been the corrupt plaything of that man !

And he had been light-hearted ! He had laughed, with the bright, clean laugh of a child. He had been so dear, so caressing. He had said : " My little mother . . ." in a voice whose tenderness had overwhelmed her with delight. Since he was, alas, only there for a few days, she had ventured to resume some

of the customs of his childhood : she would pass a finger between his neck and his collar : " You mustn't hurry so, look, you're drenched in perspiration." At night, when he was in bed, she would sit beside him and talk. Rather absurd, no doubt, with a great grown-up son. But he had not minded, he had been so kind, so darling about it—and yet God only knew how little young men cared to be treated like children—he had let her have her way during that happy week, the dear child, and she had been so infinitely grateful. He had let her kiss him as much as she liked—and somehow she had never known when to leave off ! And what was more, he had kissed her back again. If he was going out in a hurry she would say : " Dominique, aren't you going to kiss me ? " And he would exclaim : " Oh ! my darling little mother, I'm so sorry. . . ." and would spend five minutes earning her forgiveness. . . .

And at that very time . . . during that precious week, what foul caresses had he not already given and received ! . . .

And so now came disgust of the kisses she had given her son. . . .

XVIII

The name of the man is Gilbert Savinnes.

XIX

Everything is soiled, everything is tainted.

Everything. Her son, her husband, herself. Every purity is tarnished. Every trust betrayed. The past is ravaged : not one happy memory remains. And the future . . . oh ! the future ! . . .

Formerly, they had been a little family, a little middle-class family : a worthy father, a virtuous mother and a charming son. . . . Formerly, vice had meant other people's misdemeanours, the things that one only read about in the papers. . . . They themselves, the three of them, were quite another matter. Such things were not even mentioned between them. They were not even thought of—there was no question of that.

Everything is soiled. The very daylight is darkened. All is lost, even to the humble pleasure of opening one's window for a breath of fresh air.

Oh ! for something innocent upon which one's thoughts might dwell ! . . . But nowhere is there any more innocence for her. Her very touch is in itself pollution. . . . She

feels like a drowning creature who clutches at overhanging branches and breaks even those that were sound and green.

Drowning, indeed.

Oh, for one memory, one beautiful memory ! . . . A memory ? When she was twelve she would secretly drink vinegar : obviously she must have been a vicious child. Her father . . . her father with his chiselled features, his abundant white hair and his pointed beard. What delightful memories she had retained of that elderly father, to whom she had always been almost as a grandchild. A handsome man, upstanding and with a most charming voice, the voice of a preacher or an actor—they are the same. He would talk to his daughter as he would have talked to a woman—as he was in the habit of talking to women—elaborately ; he would unconsciously make an effort in order to charm anyone, even his own daughter. And he had always been so neat, so well-dressed. Even in his nightshirt he had seemed well turned out ; it was quite impossible to find him untidy ; one would have thought that he slept without ruffling his hair. She had always been proud of being seen in his company. People would say of him with secret admiration : " He's been up

to a good few pranks in his time ! " In the days when she hadn't known what that meant, she would ask him : " Papa, do tell me about your pranks. . . ." She had said that once in the drawing-room, before a lot of people, and everyone had laughed, quite kindly, including her mother. Later on, when she had grown to understand things better, she had nodded her head indulgently and had repeated with pride : " Oh, Papa has been up to plenty of pranks ! " but she hadn't even then known what she was saying.

Now she knew : pranks were a polite word for adultery.

And her mother. Ah ! there was nothing dubious there ! . . . memory of her mother's bosom that had been her refuge in sorrow, memory of the scent that lingered on her mother's hands. . . .

Memory also of the box on the ear which she would dispense as hastily as words—more hastily. An honest, happy memory, this, and so vivid. No sooner was the blow given than it was regretted, so desperately regretted that she would as soon repeat it. " Haven't you got any sense ? . . . I could kill that child ! . . . Come here at once and let me kiss you, little dunce ! . . ." When the

child would be careless crossing a road, she would utter a piercing scream and, the danger passed, would shake the life out of her and once more box her ears : she'd have broken her heart if the child had had so much as a scratch ! And so infinitely kind ! Oh no, there was nothing against her mother.

And yet . . . when someone had discussed her father's "pranks" and had added : "I'm sorry for that poor wife of his . . ." someone else had replied : " I don't think she worries about him . . ." then, a smile. . . . No more than that . . . just . . . " I don't think she worries about him. . . ." Nothing more. Madame Casseneuil might have heard it said twenty times, and she could have repeated the words by rote : " Papa's up to pranks, but mother doesn't worry about him." She could even have repeated the smile. But now . . . who could tell ? . . . She didn't worry about him. . . . Papa had his bedroom and mother had hers. Did they get on well together ? It was impossible to judge : papa was invariably courteous and attentive, to everyone, naturally not excluding his wife ; there was no proof in that. And mother was always happy and angry at the same time—like those half and half

ices, vanilla and lemon ; there was no proof of anything in that either. She had women friends, a number of women friends with whom she would quarrel and make it up again. On one day she would say : " Nelly is the most delightful person I know ! " and on the next : " Don't let me hear you mention that creature ! " One of these ladies, Madame Bertholène, had always worn stiff collars, tailor-made clothes, and unusual jewellery—jewellery such as a man might wear. Who could tell ? . . .

Nowadays, among all the friends who had peopled her mother's drawing-room, Madame Casseneuil remembers only Madame Bertholène.

Everything is soiled. Everything is tainted.

XX

The man. She has seen him.

It must have been he who was in Dominique's room at Avignon, when she had entered it with shaking knees, a throbbing head and eyes that saw nothing. It must have been he, she would swear to it.

He had spoken to her. It was he who had cared for her comfort. His voice had been gentle but very commanding :

" You must not remain here, Madame. I will take you to an hotel."

Side by side, they had walked to that hotel through the streets of Avignon. He had said : " Lean on me, Madame." And she had obeyed him . . . she had been glad to lean upon that arm in her despair. She had said : " Thank you, Monsieur . . ." In humble gratitude. Thank you ! The mockery of it !

She had not seen him. She had not thought to look at him. And then, her eyes had been blinded by tears. . . . His voice, yes, his commanding and persuasive voice, but his face . . . a blank. If he should suddenly stand before her she would not recognise him. She

would confuse his face with all those others seen and barely glimpsed since Dominique's death : the waiter at the hotel, the man in the grey dust-coat who had been on the train, or the curé who had said Mass, or the representative of the Bog Motor Company who had come to the station laden with foolish condolences.

At the station, he must have been there also. He must have been one of those men who had come with that fool. . . . She had not allowed herself to look at him.

She had been wrong.

How intensely she now wishes to see him, to see him well and clearly, the monster !

XXI

"Are you going for a stroll, Monsieur Baixas?"

"Yes, Madame Chanvre."

"It can't be Madame Casseneuil's music that disturbs you now. The poor woman never makes a sound these days."

"No, indeed. . . . And you may not believe me, Madame Chanvre, but I miss it. I'm a soft old fool, but when I heard of the poor soul's misfortune, I give you my word I was frightfully sorry: I said to myself: 'There goes the Tuesday chamber music for a long time to come,' and I swear to you I was quite unhappy about it. I know I'm selfish, but all the same. . . . And then, later on, when she resumed the concerts after the boy's death, in spite of the fact that they kept me awake with their screeching violin and their hammering piano, I actually found myself taking pleasure in them! I used to think: 'I only hope it consoles you, you poor woman, and helps you to forget. . . .' I used even to think as I turned and tossed on my bed: 'It's only half-past ten. If you go

on for another hour it will be quite soon enough for you to begin a wakeful night of unhappiness ! . . .' Can you believe it, I actually was fool enough to stay at home, instead of going out on Tuesday evenings as I used to do. It wasn't that I'd acquired a taste for music . . . and they played even worse than formerly, the violin, violoncello and piano : perhaps because they were troubled . . . but I couldn't help feeling that in staying there to listen, in waiting patiently for the moment when I could go to sleep, I was sharing the sorrow of that unhappy mother. . . . Idiotic of me, of course, but one is like that sometimes. Truthfully, when a Tuesday came and there was no more music, I felt upset. . . . I realised that she wasn't finding consolation—quite the reverse. I'd give a lot to-day to hear another boring Tuesday trio ! "

" I doubt if you'll hear one yet awhile, Monsieur Baixas."

" You're right. Several times I've been woken suddenly by cries. Her voice, in a nightmare, I suppose. . . ."

" When she passes my door, Monsieur Baixas, she looks right through me, and although I always smile and bow to her, she doesn't acknowledge it. A lady who used to

have such pretty manners. She doesn't see me at all. Have you noticed the face she has on her these days, white and smooth, like the face of a nun. And that reminds me, talking of religion. . . . I used always to tell the time by her on Sunday mornings : as she went by I would say to my husband : ' Ten minutes to eleven ' ; she was going to Mass. Since her trouble, she hasn't set foot inside a church. . . . And at home, Françoise tells me, she just does nothing at all . . . she stands by the window, staring out at nothing . . . or sits motionless in a chair for hours together. . . . For a long time she wouldn't go near Monsieur Dominique's room . . . now she goes into it. And she's very odd, it seems, Monsieur Baixas : she never touches a thing, she doesn't even sit down, she just stands there staring and staring . . . at everything, at the furniture, the ornaments, the walls. . . . And then she's taken to talking to herself ; she mutters things that no one can understand. She and her maid might be twins these days, they both spend half their time thinking aloud. No, Monsieur Baixas, I'm afraid you won't be annoyed by her music for many a long day ! "

" I'm sorry for it, Madame Chanvre. Both for her sake and mine ! You see—I'm

such an old idiot that—well, formerly I couldn't get to sleep till half-past ten, whereas now, without her music, I stay awake till midnight ! "

XXII

Sometimes Monsieur Coquineau sits in Madame Casseneuil's drawing-room. The little wrinkled old man with the greying head and the kind eyes. He comes there on various pretexts. He comes in spite of a certain offer of marriage—the rejection of which had made him feel rather ridiculous —men always feel ridiculous when they have risked an inacceptable declaration. And they may, for that matter, be right : the best of women are so vain that they are inclined to look down upon an unsuccessful suitor. It may even be true of a man of fifty who has solicited the favours of a woman of forty. And yet Monsieur Coquineau calls on Madame Casseneuil : the fact is that he is a very kind-hearted man.

He seems to divine the depth and the particular bitterness of her sorrow. He comes uninvited and seems not to notice that his remarks more often than not remain unanswered. He appears to know by intuition that if she does not answer him, she is unconscious of not having done so.

He sits there, and occasionally Madame Casseneuil realises his presence. He has such kind eyes that just for a moment she is tempted. . . . Oh ! but it would be good to break down at last ! More horrible than anything is this compulsory silence, this keeping her own counsel, because she has no one to tell. If she could only cry out : " Monsieur Coquineau ! . . . Monsieur Coquineau, my son was utterly degenerate ! " it would suffice, she would have drawn a breath of honest air and could go on living !

A neighbour. A mere acquaintance. Scarcely more than an acquaintance. But he has such kind eyes.

" Monsieur Coquineau . . ."

Such kind eyes. And he is so tactful that he knows when to be silent. He seems to divine that she has something to tell him. He sits there ready to listen and console. Such a really good man. God ! what the relief would be if she could once cry out :

" Monsieur Coquineau . . ."

No. She can never say it. With a weary gesture she sets aside his kindness. She can never say it : not of her own child, whatever she may suffer, she can never

say: "My son was an utterly worthless degenerate. . . ."

The secret will remain buried deep in her heart, it will lie there and fester till it poisons her being.

XXIII

The Luxembourg Gardens are full of playing children. Small children who throw balls and chase one another, who scrape their feet rapturously in the dusty gravel. There are also childish old men who play croquet.

The playing children have innocent eyes . . . near them sit their happy, contented mothers.

In the nursery garden, near the statue of Sainte-Beuve, Taluyers' little girl is having the time of her life dirtying her hands in the sand of the paths. She is a tiny lean little girl with a greyish-white complexion—her face is the colour of the milk they sell in Paris, and her mother observes her with admiring anxiety. Her father smiles. Young Taluyers has not grown any taller. He looks like a first communion candidate in his long trousers—he might easily have temporarily taken off his brassard ; one looks instinctively for the straw hat with the white ribbon and sees instead a cap that is almost as childish. He has not yet got a moustache,

but he still has a satchel under his arm : his studies are still unfinished and he is preparing for his medical exam. His daughter will have begun her education before he will have done with examinations.

But dusk is falling in the garden. The roll of a drum announces closing time. The end of the show : soldiers take their stand at the gates like the ticket collectors in theatres, and the keepers, hunting out the dilatory, seem to draw a grey veil over the shrubberies. The end of a lovely show : once more Taluyers and his little friend have been delighted spectators. To-day just as yesterday. They never tire of it. Simple happiness. Under one arm young Taluyers carries his schoolboy's satchel, heavy with ponderous reference volumes ; to the other arm his little friend clings all too lightly : the child follows after, reluctant.

One of the chair-women bustles along, clutching her bag closely in her hand—all the chair-women carry their bags in that particular way.

" You seem to be in a hurry to get home, Madame Gustave ! "

" Home is home, after all, Madame Louvois. Mine isn't anything very grand, it's true ; two little rooms on a courtyard, and

here one gets fresh air all day ; but for all that I only seem to draw breath at home ! . . . And then I'm hurrying because I forgot at dinner-time to put Gustave's bottle on its special step for his supper : the fourth step of the cellar stairs. Higher up it gets too warm, lower down not warm enough."

Happy Gustave !

Evenings, the Rue Le Verrier has its own small excitements, not on its pavements but in the various flats of which its houses are composed. The weather is still warm : the windows are open. In winter each flat is self-contained, the windows are another wall, the balconies might be the street ; from fourth floor to fourth floor there is no communication. They turn their backs on one another as though they were unfriendly. But in summer one has friends all along the street, one knows the wallpapers of twenty rooms, the balcony is part of the home.

It is not yet winter, so the windows are open. In each house there is one perpendicular column of light : the tenants are having dinner in their dining-rooms which have been carefully planned one just above another—the feet of one party on the heads of the next. People who are eating always look happy.

A little later on, other lights appear. A galaxy in a drawing-room, one spark in a bedroom. There are conversations over cigarettes and cigars. On the fifth floor, just opposite, lives a young married couple. Humble folk, one sees the wife in the morning, her fair hair protected by a still alluring silk scarf, shaking " flue " from a duster out of the window. At luncheon time the husband can be seen wringing the salad in a clean napkin ; in the evening they sit close together on the balcony in the darkness : one can just distinguish the pale blur of the wife's dressing-gown and the slightly darker blur of the husband's pyjamas . . . sometimes the two blurs draw together and become one. . . .

Brothers and sisters dance together to the friendly sound of a piano. A servant and her mistress over there keep up an endless and quite amiable discussion. At the corner an imminent marriage is brewing : there are flowers on the table, and a young man arrives for coffee, a young man who has a look of health and determination, who suggests a rather stupid, old-fashioned honesty : square-toed shoes and head like a clothes-brush. The marriage of Scribe's ingenue with Georges Ohnet's engineer.

After a few moments of general conversation they are allowed to come out by themselves on the balcony ; they lean demurely on the parapet and look at the evening : the Rue Le Verrier is so peaceful ; they must look forward to connubial happiness and plenty of children.

In another house one of the flats conceals an unhappy woman who hides behind an unopened window.

It is terrible to hate the happiness of others !

XXIV

Cousin Flachères has been to call. She has clasped Madame Casseneuil to her expansive bosom. She has reeled out futile words of consolation. She has spoken Dominique's name.

"No! no! I really must beg of you, Clémentine——" Madame Casseneuil had implored, "don't speak to me of Dominique . . . please don't mention him. . . ."

But it would take more than that to check Cousin Flachères. She has talked about him for two hours by the clock. She has resurrected the child Dominique whom she knew so well and who was such a darling.

"Dominique was such a darling. . . ."

She has said it in her loud, aggressive voice which is accustomed to ordering about her score of assistants. And Madame Casseneuil has found herself thinking, "Yes, in spite of everything; Dominique was a darling. . . ."

And Madame Casseneuil has been to see Cousin Vavrette. Why? She hardly knows. Perhaps in order to hear Cousin Vavrette

also say with the same innocent smile: "Dominique was a darling. . . ." and Cousin Vavrette has said it, in the chilly emptiness of her vast drawing-room. Vavrette had recently sold its entire furniture for a fancy price—the drawing-room had been sacked that very evening. There remained a single Aubusson arm-chair of extreme beauty, which contrived to look shabby in the denuded room. Nothing else except a small settee and, of course, the gilded column, the "elephant." Cousin Vavrette had smiled a melancholy smile, and her hand had actually caressed the "elephant" when she said in a voice tinged with regret—regret for what?—

"Ah, yes . . . Dominique was a darling . . . but he was too shy. . . ."

Too shy, perhaps. Too gentle. Too weak.

Next day, Madame Casseneuil had walked past the windows of the Paradis. They were making preparations for a forthcoming sale. Some of the windows were concealed by blinds.

Magicians who knew how to drape satins into a multi-coloured cascade, who miraculously transformed Turkish towels into blue and white peacocks, were at work behind those blinds. The blinds did not quite reach

the bottom of the windows and one could see their feet and the hems of their trousers. And Madame Casseneuil had wondered then whether it might not be Monsieur Verdales himself, preparing the miracles with his skilful, fat fingers. Monsieur Verdales, the father of the little six-year-old girl with whom Dominique had fallen so much in love during three summer months, on the beach at Trestraou.

A little girl dressed in green rompers, with her hair cropped short and a small, wilful voice. She had ordered Dominique about and he had obeyed her : " You're the workman, I'm the master . . . " or : " I'm a queen, and you, Dominique, you're my slave . . . you must kiss my feet, and then I strike you." And she would really strike him. One evening after a day of such games, Madame Casseneuil had discovered on Dominique's arms the blue marks of pinches and the traces of wicked little nails.

" What are those marks, Dominique ? "

" I don't know, mother."

" Did Sylvie do that ? "

" Oh no, mother, of course not ! " He wouldn't have betrayed her for anything in the world. It would only have made him unhappy to insist.

He had put up with anything. He had been a weakling. Even at that age. A poor little soul, too gentle, too yielding, a poor little soul. . . . When he had found himself far from her, alone, that man had made his appearance. And he, always weak. . . . A victim, a mere child, a pitiful victim. . . . The other was the criminal. What had he not destroyed, that other ! That monster of depravity, that—beast ! . . .

XXV

A beast may be slaughtered. . . .

XXVI

The gunsmith will suspect nothing. One is mistrustful of excitable, hysterical little women, or of stately, composed women with baleful eyes. But this gunsmith will see a quiet lady in mourning, a lady forty years old with smooth hair and a calm expression. A lady whose eyes have for so long been gentle that they have not yet unlearnt their gentleness. Madame Flachères had once said of her, laughing :

" Good Lord ! Mathilde, you do look maternal. One doesn't do it these days, it dates you ! "

She will look maternal when she enters the gunsmith's shop. It is so reassuring. . . . Even gunsmiths associate a " crime passionnel " exclusively with the troubles of husband and wife, lover and mistress. The gunsmith will think : " She's a silly woman who's afraid of the dark. . . ." He will even say with an indulgent and superior air : " Shall I explain to you how to use it ? " . . . and he will explain with amiable patronage . . . the barrel . . . the hair

trigger . . . all perfectly simple. . . . She will listen attentively, sure of her self-command. The gunsmith will have no suspicions. And in any case, other people's crimes are his livelihood.

" Shall I wrap it up for you ? "

Yes. He will even tie it round neatly with string. She will leave the shop with her head erect, having duly murmured : " Thank you, Monsieur. . . . " with the usual polite smile. She will quietly return home, bearing her salvation, and since she is by nature a methodical woman, she will very probably note down in her account book : " Metro : 1 franc. Grapes : 2 francs 50 centimes. Revolver : 40 francs . . . "

And she will look at her handbag, that black satin handbag with silver mounts that she uses daily, knowing that it contains a sixfold vengeance, a sixfold punishment. . . .

XXVII

Avignon.

She had been very prudent in the railway compartment. Prudent and composed. She had actually slept. An uneasy, jolted slumber, it is true, interrupted for an hour, and then resumed, rather exhausting than otherwise, but for that matter not very different from her usual run of nights. At dawn she had eaten some bread and chocolate, regretting that she had only brought one packet with her. Before leaving she had thought : " I'll only take that . . . I shan't be hungry. . . . " but she had felt hungry, nevertheless. Dawn had come with a yellow tinge, the train seemed to be making its way through mud. Her neighbours had slept with open mouths, with rumpled hair and nodding, jolting heads—one would have taken them for drunkards—they were hideous. And then, little by little, the train had steamed into daylight : it seemed to be finding its way out of the mud. Minute by minute it appeared to free itself. It panted and finally steamed

out into the full sunshine. Then it uttered a piercing whistle like a cry of deliverance.

She, also, after all, is straining and panting, seeking to struggle forth from the mud which engulfs her. One more effort, only one—and her cry of deliverance will rise to a heaven that is once more clean.

Avignon.

And suddenly her limbs are invaded by deadly weakness. This is the town where Dominique has died. Here is the station, and away over there, beyond the white road that has only just emerged from the night, but that seems to have retained the heat of yesterday's sunshine, the road that is already dotted with cyclists—over there, lies the way to Barbentane . . . lies another road, a road equally white, a road that she has not seen but that she can visualise so clearly, the road upon which, last June, a motor was overturned into a ditch, and where, nearby, at the foot of a tree, a poor child was picked up so terribly disfigured that his mother was not allowed to look at his body.

For an instant she remembers only that her son is dead. Nothing more. And it is terrible—and restful ! Just a weak woman for a moment, but for a moment only.

Carriages from the hotels cluster round the station.

" Carriage, Madame ? . . . Carriage ? . . ."

Where can she go to ? It is still early. With her obsession folded away within her, she merely seems a rather disconcerted tourist. For such there is always a persistent coachman, who firmly seizes the traveller's valise and sets it inside his vehicle.

" To what hotel, madame ? "

A hotel ? To what purpose ? She has no intention of remaining in this town. Before evening she will again be in the train. So soon as she shall have accomplished her mission.

She does not reflect that the reports of the revolver will bring confusion and people hurrying to arrest her. All that is too remote. It has not even struck her that she will be asked her motives for killing this man. That also is remote. Her thoughts have stopped abruptly short at the essential : she must slaughter the beast.

And so the coachman drives her about in the pleasant morning air, and his horse trots placidly, striking the roadway sharply with its hooves. The driver believes her to be a tourist who has come to see the Palace of the Popes, the ruins of Gothic archways, the little Virgins in their shrines at the corners of

the streets, and the mutilated Bridge of Saint Bénezet. . . . He turns in his seat and names the churches which he indicates with a sweep of his whip. Then he cracks the whip cheerily. She thanks him with a nod at each separate explanation. Between her knees she clasps her black satin handbag with the silver mounts ; its weight drags down the stretched material of her dress—a revolver is a fairly heavy object. . . .

On the road that leads to the Rocher des Doms a violent wind is raising the dust. The sky is of a marvellously clear, pale blue. She has dismissed the carriage. She wishes to remain alone, in the midst of this fair-weather storm, to breathe in the morning on this day of deliverance. The ruthless Rhône thunders on its way. Beyond the island of La Barthélasse, Ville-neuve-les-Avignon rears its fort and its ancient towers.

All is about to end, like an evil dream. So soon as the blatant beast shall be brought low, his youthful victim will again be pure.

Light. Radiance. And an all-cleansing wind . . . the poor little amputated bridge stretches towards the distant bank its inadequate arm.

It will not be revenge, or even a desire for

justice : it will simply be something that must be accomplished.

A hail of loosened tiles torn down by the wind. Brown tiles, red tiles, pink tiles, some almost white. . . .

It will be nothing more than the effacing of a stain. Yes, exactly that, something that has got to be cleansed. . . .

And this is the morning of a beautiful day.

. . . But she does not even know the address of this man. She sets out, her dressing-case in one hand while the other clasps her handbag and clutches at her hat, which the wind is threatening to remove. She sets out on her way, accompanied by the wind which seems to leap around her like a too-effusive dog that jumps up on your clothes, licks your face and almost knocks you over. She goes into a shop.

" Excuse me, madame . . . but could you give me the address of Monsieur Gilbert Savinnes ? "

It sounds a very simple enquiry. And yet she has made it in a hesitating voice : she has never been an aggressive woman.

" Certainly, madame . . . Monsieur Gilbert Savinnes, the corn chandler ? "

A corn chandler ? Is it possible ? There

is indeed no romance in this shady entanglement. No selection and no refinement. Just unadulterated debauch. Dominique's bedroom was an ugly furnished apartment: two walnut chairs, two arm-chairs upholstered in red velvet. A cheap yellow wallpaper sprinkled with blue flowers, and in the recess a common, old-fashioned bed. And what a partner! Monsieur Savinnes, the corn chandler. A well-known tradesman. It seems to intensify the foulness.

Here is his house. The shop, above which is written: "Grain and forage merchant. Bran and sharps." The living-rooms are overhead.

Here is the office into which she has been ushered. A business office exactly like those in every city of the world: leather arm-chairs and Chesterfield and a yellow rolltop desk.

And here is the man.

He has not kept her waiting. She had fully intended to strike him down at once, as soon as he should appear on the threshold of the door. Her hand, inside her bag, has seized the revolver, cocked it and released the safety catch from the trigger, just as the gunsmith had told her. But she does not fire. She wishes to see him. To look at him carefully—before the end.

She stares at him. Good God! He looks

just like other men. Perhaps in her heart she is disappointed. She may have expected that the man who had seduced her son must of necessity be remarkably handsome—or at any rate very unusual. And this is a man like a thousand others. Neither tall nor short, clean-shaven, about thirty years of age . . . he wears a very ordinary grey lounge suit. He does not even look wicked.

He motions her to a chair, but she does not sit down : she could not be so sure of her aim.

He speaks to her. What has he said? She does not even hear him. With her left hand she widens the mouth of her bag, with her right she firmly grasps the weapon. She has looked at him long enough : it is time to kill him.

But a strange thing has happened : since she has met him face to face, she is no longer able to hate him.

She will fire twice in quick succession, and then let off the other four shots at leisure.

He speaks. His voice is still the voice of that other occasion, at once very gentle and very authoritative. He speaks. What has he said? He is actually speaking of Dominique ! . . .

Naturally ! He has no idea that she knows, that she found those compromising letters.

He must have said to Dominique time and again : " Whatever you do, be careful to burn them ! " And so the poor man has not the faintest idea that his death is awaiting him six times over in that unassuming little black satin handbag. No, he is merely being civil to the mother of a young man who used to represent the Bog Motor Company at Avignon, whom he knew and who is now dead. And he speaks to her of her son quite naturally and with very obvious affection. He says :

" You have come to pray beside his grave, Madame. . . . How well I understand it. You never gave any precise orders regarding the tombstone. I realised that the overwhelming nature of your grief precluded your remembering. I felt sure that later on . . . And meanwhile I ventured to make some provisional arrangements. You will see for yourself."

" *You* have made arrangements ? "

He has no idea that she knows, so he looks her straight in the eyes :

" You see, I was very devoted to Dominique. . . . "

What an expression ! He thinks that she has never known.

" Dominique often used to come here and

yarn. He used to sit in that very chair you are in now. . . ."

Ah ! Dominique used to come here ?

" He was a perfectly delightful creature. . . ."

His face breaks into a melancholy smile and he pulls open the drawer of his rolltop desk.

" Here's a little snapshot that I took of him. . . . Did you ever see it ? "

He hands it to Madame Casseneuil. She has to let go of the revolver in her bag in order to take the photograph from him.

Her movements are mechanical—they are meaningless gestures. She has no thoughts. Suddenly nothing remains but simple things, a name that she hears repeated : " Dominique," vague ideas : " he used to come here . . . this is a snapshot of him. . . ."

" Did you ever see it ? " She cannot see it even now, her eyes are too full of tears. Tears ! The first tears—at last ! . . . The man had kept that photograph of Dominique in his desk.

Only simple things remain : he has not forgotten Dominique, he has taken the trouble to arrange about his grave. . . . Only simple things : he had loved him. . . . It was he—she now knows it—the man

who was crying at the funeral, in the church. He loved him—but with what an ignoble love !

She cannot remember that : only simple things remain.

Someone has loved Dominique. Someone has felt his death. Someone has spoken lovingly of Dominique.

And it was good to hear it. . . .

A mother . . . A mother ! Ah ! there can be nothing abominable for a mother in her child ! This one had believed that she despised her son, that she had ceased to love him. . . . Can one despise one's child ? Can one leave off loving him ? . . . She had denied her love, but she had not diminished it. It is there as before, and stronger than ever.

This man speaks to her of Dominique, and she is filled with consolation.

And the facts . . . oh ! the facts ! But of course, all men lead two lives : the intellectual life and the life of sex. What is this man saying now ?

" He adored you, Madame. You don't know how often we talked of you together."

And it was true. He had adored her. His unhappy aberration had never corrupted in him the man that she had loved. He was her

son. He is dead. That is the only thing that matters.

He is dead. There lies the irreparable disaster. He is dead. For evermore.

She leans closer to the man who is speaking to her of Dominique. She listens eagerly to his words. He relates, with growing emotion, his memories of Dominique. He loved Dominique and was loved by him in return.

A flood of consolation—in spite of all she knows . . .

He is the first person who can speak to her with impunity of her sorrow : a sorrow which he alone can divine—because he shares it. He says :

" If you only knew how well I understand . . ."

They are the only two beings in the world who have loved Dominique, and who have been loved by Dominique. . . .

He pauses :

" I am afraid I am tiring you, Madame. You will certainly be remaining some days at Avignon. Come and see me again. We can talk of him together."

She answers :

" Yes."

Her heart is amazingly lighter. Her face is bathed in tears. She wishes to dry them

before going out into the street. She hunts for a handkerchief in the black satin handbag. In finding it she lets fall a packet of letters from the bag. They are the fatal letters. She had brought them with her.

Monsieur Savinnes bends down to restore them——

And in doing so he recognises his own handwriting.

There is a long silence.

At length, without raising his eyes, he ventures to say rather hoarsely :

" You knew ? . . . "

" Yes, I knew."

There is another silence.

" And you were coming again ? . . ."

Another silence. She also lowers her eyes. And then she answers him :

" Yes, I am coming again."

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